

Akako

Illust. by Hazuki Futaba



The Reincarnated Villainess Won't Seek Revenge



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The Reincarnated Villainess Won't Seek Revenge Volume 1

Akako

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TENSEI SHITA AKUYAKU REIJO WA FUKUSHUU WO NOZOMANAI Volume 1

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The Reincarnated Villainess Won't Seek Revenge

Mary Edigma
(Heroine)

Age 18

Daughter of the baron of the remote Edigma region.

She's remembered Rosemary's life, and
wants to live in peace in the present.

Rosemary Hubert
(Mary's Past Life) Age 16 (Deceased)

Mary's previous life. She was engaged
to Diresias' crown prince, but was hung
for crimes she didn't commit.



Reynaldo Rose

Age 32

Rosemary's younger brother.

Vows to get revenge on his innocent sister's behalf. Known as the Ice Duke.

Rizel Dirésias

Age 19

The son of King Grey, Rosemary's former fiancé.

Falls in love at first sight with Mary.

Albert McClain

Age 36

Rosemary's devoted knight and childhood friend.

He's now Diresias' knight commander.

Prologue

A solemn bell tolled the hour. It echoed across the plaza, where the masses had gathered, and announced the upcoming execution. As the crowd of civilians pushed forward to get a better look, a single woman was dragged to the gallows. She wore the unkempt clothes of a prisoner.

Her golden hair—once long and beautiful—had been tragically chopped below shoulder length. The highborn ladies who watched from afar furrowed their brows at the shortness of it, which was unbecoming of her former station as a noblewoman. Some even hid their mouths with folding fans and laughed.

The prisoner had been starved, as evidenced by her sunken cheeks and long legs reduced to nothing but skin and bone. Her skin, deprived of sunlight, was pale and dirty. She hadn't even been given shoes. Scratches formed on the soles of her bare feet each time she took a step. Nevertheless, no one allowed her to stop. Bound by a rope, she was forced forward.

The commoners didn't know the identity of this woman, who would be publicly executed. Even amongst the plebeians, no heinous criminals would receive such a punishment. So they whispered amongst themselves.

"If she's about to be hanged, she must have done something unspeakable."

The executioner stood in front of the crowd, raised a document, and spoke in a booming voice. "Rosemary Hubert shall hereby be executed."

The crowd stirred. No one knew this unsightly woman was Rosemary Hubert, the former fiancée of Crown Prince Grey Dirésias.

As the executioner yelled to silence the boisterous plaza, Rosemary looked up at the sky apathetically. The bruises on her wrists had turned so black that they would never disappear. Yet even now, her fingertips were slender and beautiful, attesting to how well she'd once cared for them.

Her tranquil gaze entranced some of the onlookers. They expected criminals

to weep and be fearful of death, but Rosemary boldly stood in front of the gallows, showing no trace of dread.

“Bring the criminal to the stage.”

After the executioner finished reading the charges and gave this order, the man restraining Rosemary pushed her from behind. Slowly, she climbed atop the platform, where a loop of rope dangled in front of her. Still behind Rosemary, the man forced her to move farther, placing the noose around her neck. The rope tightened around her throat. Fear welled up inside her, but at the same time, she looked forward to finally being released.

In the distance, Prince Grey—her former fiancé—was watching her. His beloved Tia Danzes was with him. After calling off his engagement with Rosemary, the prince immediately announced his new betrothal to Tia. Though Rosemary couldn't see his expression, his bearing held no indication of sadness.

A man condemned his former fiancée to death without believing a single word she'd said. Likewise, another woman had stolen Rosemary's position, framed her for a crime, and driven her to execution.

Those who knew the truth watched Rosemary silently. When she scanned the area, she even spotted the maids who had served her so well. She tried to smile at them to ease their worries, but the rope was so tight that she couldn't.

Though many people derided Rosemary, she also noticed guilt-ridden expressions. Despite knowing the truth, they had to keep silent. It was beyond her control. In much the same way that she couldn't control the people who called her a villainess behind her back. Her defeat had been assured even before Tia had framed her for the crime. It had begun when her father—a marquis—had been set up.

I can't hope for a happy ending like in those stories I love, Rosemary thought self-deprecatingly. *And so, my life will end with everyone believing I'm a villainess.*

The bell rang out once more. After stepping away from Rosemary, the man placed his hand on a mechanism that would open the bottom of the platform. Rosemary closed her eyes, expecting the end to come at any time.

Then a voice called out her name, causing her heart to tremble ever so slightly.

“Rosemary!” a crying boy shouted. “Elder Sister Rosemary!”

Ignoring the pain from the rope, Rosemary looked in the direction of the wailing boy.

“Reynaldo!” she called back to him.

At the end, she saw her younger brother, whom she loved more than anyone else. She’d thought she had no tears left, and yet more streamed down her face.

My darling little brother. You believed me, Reynaldo. My last wish is that you find happiness in the future.

The bell rang louder, and Rosemary’s feet floated in the air. All at once, the noose around her neck strangled her. As her consciousness faded, she could still hear the sound of the bell.

✱ ✱ ✱

“**ARE** you okay, Mary?”

When I opened my eyes, a man was looking down at me worriedly. Despite the slight creases around the corners of his eyes, his boyish features looked youthful. Hazel hair—long and messy—framed his honey-colored eyes. He also boasted a charming mustache. Probably due to feeling self-conscious about his boyish face.

“Mary?” the man called my name once more.

Wait, who’s Mary? Aren’t I Rosemary?

My head was spinning. I couldn’t forget what I’d just witnessed. Moments ago, I’d been watching a young woman at her execution. I wasn’t sure what had happened, but I must have collapsed, and this man woke me up.

“Um...” I murmured in a strained voice.

Was that my voice? It sounded both familiar and unfamiliar.

Overjoyed, the man gently embraced me. “Oh, thank goodness, Mary. I

thought you wouldn't wake up."

He smelled of familiar pasture lands.

Yes, I know this scent.

"Father..." I mumbled.

I remember. This was my beloved father, and I hugged him. Other memories flooded back to me. My name was Mary Edigma. As the eldest daughter of a baron, I lived in a small, remote town far from the royal capital. I was eighteen years old. My mother died of an illness when I was a child, and I lived with my father and older brother.

The woman who had been executed was Rosemary Hubert—my past self.

Reincarnation? It's like something out of a story.

Father led me back to my room, where I sat down on my bed. He handed me a cup, and I pressed it to my lips. I couldn't suppress a bitter smile while drinking the hot milk. The trigger for remembering my past life—which I'd forgotten until now—had been simple. Despite being the daughter of a baron, I lived identically to a commoner. Thus, I'd been tending to the livestock, as I did every day.

The Edigma region was small, with few residents. No knights were stationed here. Instead, neighborhood watch groups patrolled the area. Likewise, commerce was limited, and popular items always arrived in our provincial region a few months late. In short, we were a village of farmers and fields. Our main selling points were open pastures and plentiful sunlight.

After helping Father milk the cows, I'd left to retrieve a rope from inside the cattle barn. We used this rope to gather the always-necessary firewood. As I'd reeled in the rope, a nearby cow—having been startled by an insect or something—began thrashing about. Then I was startled. I foolishly lost my footing. By some twist of fate, the rope grazed the base of my neck. At that moment, I'd collapsed and relived Rosemary's execution in my memories.

Father found me sprawled out on the ground and was worried that I'd hit my head. However, since I didn't have any noticeable injuries, I'd replied, "I just lost consciousness." Of course, I couldn't say anything about having regained

memories of my past life for fear of sounding *mad*.

Nevertheless, Father had been terrified. Perhaps my fainting spell reminded him of losing his beloved wife to disease.

“Sorry, Father,” I said. “But I feel okay now. I’m not in any pain.”

“Really?” he asked. “Even so, you work too hard. This is the perfect opportunity for you to rest. Since you’re already in bed, there’s no need to get up.”

Father patted my head with a gentle hand, the warmth of his palm pleasant against my hair. I nodded. To be quite honest, regaining Rosemary’s memories had shaken me. When I tried to recall my past life again, it returned to me as vividly as a picture book.

As the daughter of a marquis, Rosemary Hubert was the former fiancée of Grey Dirésias—the current king. Rosemary’s strict father had trained her from a young age to become a worthy queen. Outfitted in elegant dresses, she’d learned noble manners and etiquette. Likewise, she’d had ladylike conduct drilled into her to an excruciating extent.

Her overly ambitious father had treated commoners—even those of his region—as a means of generating wealth. Similarly, he’d used her as a political tool. Though he hadn’t loved his children, she yearned for his affection, unable to rebel against him. So Rosemary had become the crown prince’s fiancée as instructed, but as a result, she’d also become a pawn in political games. In the end, her father’s schemes failed, leading to his exile. Meanwhile, Rosemary had been hanged for a crime she hadn’t committed.

I’d known of this cruel history even in my second life, for I’d been taught a great deal about the villainess Rosemary. Despite being the crown prince’s fiancée, she’d unjustly assaulted other women. Furthermore, she’d been a heinous criminal and a licentious young lady. Everyone in the kingdom remembered her as having been truly wicked. When young noblewomen received a lady’s education, Rosemary was always used as an example of how not to behave.

Rumors are terrifying things.

Truth be told, Rosemary had never so much as kissed a man. In fact, she'd been a paragon of chastity, having rarely even spoken to her fiancé. Regardless, she'd still taken the blame for a great many evils. After she'd been hanged, the truth had been covered up and buried alongside her.

Thus, the villainess had exited the stage, and at the end of a passionate love affair, the leading actors—Grey and Tia—had enjoyed a glorious wedding ceremony. This story was even made into a picture book that the kingdom's citizens all adored.

Speaking of which, I unconsciously hated that picture book as a child.

After watching Father leave my room, I stretched out my arms while sitting in bed. In this life, I had nothing tying me down—no political conspiracies, no wicked women harassing me, and no fiancé who viewed me with revulsion.

“Nothing beats peace and quiet,” I muttered to myself.

I tied back my hazel hair, which I'd inherited from Father, and when I smiled, it reached my honey-colored eyes.

How I love my current home. It always smells of pastures, livestock, and freshly baked bread. Rosemary's life always made me feel claustrophobic.

“I'm happy now,” I whispered to my past self.

Surely, Rosemary felt satisfied as well.

* * *

SILENCE had fallen over the gallows following the execution. Each time the wind blew, the corpse—which had been left hanging as a warning—swayed stiffly. As the sun began to set, the crowd dispersed one at a time. Now that the uproar had quieted, only a single guard remained on the ominous platform.

As the guard yawned, an approaching figure called out to him, prompting him to look in the man's direction. The newcomer appeared to be a young knight. A boy stood behind the knight, garmented in the sort of refined clothes that only nobles wore. He had the face of a beautiful woman, and though his golden hair resembled the hanging criminal's, his was even lovelier than hers. All told, this sort of beauty was wasted on a young man.

“I’m here on orders from the king,” the knight said. “May I show you his letter?”

The knight withdrew a piece of paper from his pocket, showing it to the guard. However, the guard didn’t understand its contents, for he’d never learned to read. He’d been hired to act as a sentry.

“It’s an order to retrieve the body,” the knight explained.

After looking over the letter, the guard nodded, pretending to have understood its contents. He then left his post. When accepting this job, he’d been told that the body would be burned tomorrow, but until then, it would serve as a warning. If those plans had been expedited, it wasn’t any of his business. *This just means my job is over faster*, he thought happily.

Once the guard was gone, the knight stood before the dangling prisoner, cutting the rope that had tormented her for too long. She fell, and he caught her. The knight had always considered her to be light of weight, but now she was shockingly emaciated. Her flesh had all melted away, and when he held her, he felt naught but bones. Her once-soft hair had been dirtied and tragically torn to shreds.

After closing the young woman’s half-lidded eyes, the knight wiped the drool spilling from her mouth with his sleeve, not caring if he besmirched his clothes. Finally, he gently wrapped her in a cloak, cradling her in his arms as one might hold a child. He and the boy then headed back down the road they’d come from.

As he walked beside the knight, the boy held the young woman’s cold, emaciated hand. Her fingers drooped languidly. During her lifetime, she’d often held his hand like this. Yet now, her touch no longer radiated any warmth. In an attempt to warm her icy skin, the boy squeezed her hand even harder.

When the pair arrived at their carriage, the knight boarded the vehicle first, laying the woman down on the cushioned bench. The boy sat down on the opposite side. After they’d exchanged glances, the knight called out to the coachman, and the carriage began moving.

“Let’s go home, Rosemary,” the boy whispered to the sleeping woman.

Reynaldo—one of the few people Rosemary had ever opened up to—took his elder sister's hand, kissing it reverently. By *home*, he hadn't meant the royal palace, where Rosemary had been set up and murdered. Neither had he meant the Hubert region, where their father had used her as a political tool. No, he'd been referring to the villa where they'd spent their childhoods.

The knight withdrew the fake letter from his pocket and crumpled the piece of paper in his hand. Seated next to the coachman, he stared at the castle towering in the distance. Reynaldo stared at the same scene.

The knight had sworn his loyalty to Rosemary, and her murderers resided within that castle. Reynaldo had loved his elder sister more than anything, and her tormentors resided within that castle. The knight and Reynaldo shared only one thing in common: a desire for vengeance.

As dusk fell over the city, the carriage drove away undetected, vanishing into the gloom. The next morning, the missing body caused an uproar, leading to the hired guard's punishment. Not a single person believed his testimony.

In the end, the body of Rosemary Hubert—a criminal once condemned to death—was never found.

Chapter One: The Reincarnated Villainess

A rattling carriage made for a most unpleasant ride. However, when you adapt to your environment, you can grow accustomed to most things. Thus, I adapted to the nauseating rocking of the carriage.

After more than a full day, of course I would get used to it.

I was heading towards the royal castle, which was visible in the far-off distance. Everything started when my older brother returned from the castle for the first time in a month and gave me a letter.

Despite having Rosemary's memories, nothing about my daily life changed. Then, my brother chucked an envelope at me, even though he should've handled it with far more care. Rather than greet him, I'd simply asked a question.

"What's this?"

"It's a letter to you from the royal family," he replied.

"Wha?!" I couldn't suppress a foolish-sounding cry. "Why me?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

While munching on a piece of freshly baked bread, my brother—Stanley Edigma—headed towards the back of our manor. He was likely going to report to our father on the royal capital and our territory.

Our father distanced himself from politics, finding meaning in a quiet, pastoral life instead. In contrast, Stanley hated living in the countryside. Immediately after succeeding our father, he'd started visiting the royal capital, and once a month, he would return to check on our territory. That said, nothing ever happened in a remote, peaceful region like Edigma. Instead, it seemed as though Stanley merely came home to relax. In truth, our father still oversees the territory's minute affairs. Since I also helped out sometimes, Stanley was a feudal lord only in name.

Turning over the envelope, I found a familiar lion seal. The symbol of our king. Meaning this letter had come from the monarchy itself. During my time as Rosemary, I often saw this seal. Even so, I never expected to see it as my current self—Mary. With a trembling hand, I withdrew a letter opener from the drawer, cut the seal, and read the letter. Once finished, I let out a tremendous sigh.

“How awful,” I muttered to myself.

“You received a letter from the royal family?” Father called out to me.

After Stanley briefed him, Father came down the stairs and stood beside me. I didn’t even want to hold the letter, so I passed it to him.

“Incredible,” he said after reading it. “A letter of invitation to become a handmaid at the palace? Why would they summon you, Mary?”

“The crown prince is searching for a fiancée,” Stanley replied while exiting Father’s library. Apparently, he’d finished his bread.

Father nodded. “Yes, I suppose Prince Razel has reached that age.”

Crown Prince Razel Dirésias was the son of King Grey—Rosemary’s former fiancé—and Queen Tia.

If I’m not mistaken, Prince Razel was born around a year after Rosemary’s death.

The nation had celebrated this child, who’d been born from a passionate love affair, as the country’s future king.

“Even so, choosing Mary as a candidate for the queen doesn’t make sense,” Father said. “What benefit would the daughter of a provincial baron bring to the royal family?”

Stanley nodded in agreement.

After thinking it over, I voiced my opinion. “It’s probably *because* I provide no benefit. If the prince marries someone with too much value, it could weaken the current monarchy. In that case, why not choose a girl from the countryside who’s not too valuable but not too risky either? For now, the court will just have the prince and his bride marry. But once his authority as the new king has

been safely established, the new queen will be welcomed into the castle as well.”

I wanted nothing to do with the political struggles that had tormented Rosemary. Rosemary had only become Crown Prince Grey’s fiancée because Marquis Hubert wanted to strengthen his own position.

Rosemary’s father hadn’t been interested in anything outside of power struggles. As a child, she received little love or affection, leading to chronic loneliness. She’d fought for her father’s attention, but by the time she’d realized the futility of this, it was already too late.

“My word, Mary, you certainly are intelligent,” Father said. “That never would have occurred to me.”

I returned Father’s smile, not commenting further. He always praised me like that.



Unlike Marquis Hubert, my current father provided Stanley and me with plenty of love. Yes, Stanley could be annoying sometimes, but each time I recalled the loneliness of my past life, I realized how much my current family's love had saved me.

I've been so blessed in this life.

I smiled at Father, warmth filling my chest.

"Well, there are also quite a few rumors circulating about you," Stanley said, his cheeks stuffed with a second piece of bread. "That's probably another reason you received this letter."

These words broke me out of my reverie, and I looked up. "Rumors?"

"I'm talking about your debutante."

Father and I both groaned. At the same time, I had a flashback to the event in question, which I desperately wanted to forget.

Debutantes were events in which noblewomen were presented to high society as new adults. At the slightly late age of seventeen, I'd participated in a debutante held in the royal capital. Back then, I hadn't yet regained Rosemary's memories, but I still walked to the place of my death with a heavy gait. Honestly, I'd refused to visit the royal capital until I was almost too old for a debutante.

Nevertheless, Stanley had threatened me by saying, "You'll never find a husband this way." Thus, I'd reluctantly attended the event with him as my escort.

When I'd entered the venue, a few people looking in my direction were taken aback. This had been due to my dress—one of the rumors Stanley had spoken of. At the time, frilly princess dresses were all the rage. Even so, I'd worn a mermaid dress with a simple design.

At seventeen, I was older than the other girls. An over-the-top, frilly dress would have been too embarrassing. And anyways, you couldn't even find fashionable dresses in a rural area like Edigma. So, rather than being mocked for wearing an outdated dress, I'd wanted to wear one that suited me.

So I'd visited a seamstress friend of mine, and she gave me a thorough overview of dress designs going back several years. After inspecting the materials, I realized that dress fashions changed on a standard cycle. A few years ago, ladylike mimosa dresses were in vogue. Before then, dresses with empire lines had been popular.

I'd then considered what dresses would suit me, excluding styles that had recently gone out of fashion. Since I was a little taller than the average woman and slender, I'd decided on a mermaid dress and started making one.

Due to my honey-colored eyes and hazel hair, the fabric needed to be simple rather than gaudy. Likewise, I'd eschewed bulky ornamentations, choosing ones that matched the slender design. Finally, I'd selected a silver fabric that only sparkled when reflecting light. If my hairstyle had been too mature, I would have looked out of place at the debutante. Thus, I'd let my bangs down and pulled up my hair in the back.

As a result, no one laughed at me, but I *had* stood out.

"I'm still asked about that dress whenever I visit the castle," Stanley said. "The viscount wants to hire you at his company or bring you in as his personal designer."

"Politely decline those offers, if you don't mind," I replied.

Though my taste in dresses might have been refined, I hadn't created that garment alone. I'd only received such praise thanks to the help of my seamstress friend.

"Something else happened, right?" Father asked in a carefree tone. "Could that be another reason for the rumors?"

When Stanley burst out laughing, I glared at him.

"Are you talking about when she magnificently slew the poisonous moth of high society?" Ignoring my glare, Stanley deliberately raised his voice. "A certain viscount's daughter from the capital and her group of sycophants started bullying a young lady from the Dozé region. Lady Dozé might have suffered great embarrassment, but you came to her rescue. As I recall, you sang her hometown's praises for finding a wonderful gemstone just a few days before.

According to you, even the queen had been overjoyed by the splendor of this stone. Who knew you could lie so well with a straight face?

“Of course, bringing up the queen’s name caused the viscount’s daughter to shrivel up. So you dragged Lady Dozé off to some other place. Everyone praised you for ending the matter peacefully, and the sycophants left with their heads hung in shame. If I’m not mistaken, the crowd even applauded you and Lady Dozé.”

I flushed deeply. Incidentally, Stanley should have been escorting me at the time, but he’d abandoned his little sister to flirt with other women. What a terrible older brother.

“Lady Dozé’s parents still give me letters of thanks because of it,” Stanley finished.

Father smiled as Stanley recounted the story with a smirk. Meanwhile, I sighed.

I shouldn’t have drawn so much attention to myself.

At the time, I couldn’t believe how well I’d conducted myself. Perhaps the exhaustive instructions in ladylike manners I’d received as Rosemary had aided me somehow?

At any rate, I removed myself from the men’s conversation, returned to my room, and read over the letter once more. No matter how many times I scanned the contents, it instructed me to present myself for duty as a palace handmaid. Despite being sent as a noble and upright *invitation*, I wouldn’t be able to refuse this order.

For most of my life, I’d avoided the capital. I could never bring myself to like the place. Whenever Father invited me, I always shook my head, choosing to remain in the countryside town of Edigma. As a child, I’d sometimes been forced to visit due to unavoidable circumstances, and I’d always wanted to leave as soon as possible. Now that I remember my past life, I finally understand my reluctance.

My memories of the royal capital were both happy and sad. If I’d recalled Rosemary’s life during my childhood, I wouldn’t have been able to endure it—

particularly the hanging. My aversion towards the capital, which had likely been unconscious self-defense, made complete sense to me now. However, since I'd regained my memories as an adult, the idea of seeing the gallows didn't scare me too much. Certainly, recalling my death had terrified me at first, but plenty of other memories had returned to me in even clearer detail.

With Rosemary's memories etched faintly in my mind, I'd steeled myself. Later, Stanley and I boarded a carriage bound for the capital, the journey lasting for over a day.

* * *

"ALBERT, Albert, do you want to play knight?" Rosemary asked.

"Again?" Albert sighed. "I'm tired of that game."

"Oh c'mon, it's important to rehearse these things. I really want to play knight."

By *play knight*, Rosemary meant repeatedly reenacting the scene in which a knight swore loyalty to the princess. A girl with fanciful dreams and a boy with abundant energy—both six years old—had different ideas about what games to play. Yet in the end, Albert gave into his lady's wishes and played knight with her.

"When you grow up, are you going to be a knight?" Rosemary asked.

Albert nodded. "That's right."

"Well then, you'll have to protect me when I become the princess!"

These words—spoken by his childhood friend—had turned into a small goal for Albert. For generations, the men of his family had been high commanders of the chivalric order. He planned to follow in their footsteps, taking it for granted that he too would become a knight. "In the future, you will be Rosemary's personal guard," Albert's father always told him. Yet even without this instruction, he would have done so.

For as long as Albert could remember, his and Rosemary's relationship had been one of master and servant. Nevertheless, he treasured Rosemary, for they'd also been raised as childhood friends.

“Become a knight like the one in this book,” she instructed him.

One illustration in the picture book—which Rosemary had read countless times—depicted a knight kneeling and offering his allegiance to the princess. Rosemary often stared at the book, her jade eyes sparkling. In the future, she would become the crown prince’s fiancée. In between her daily training, she would play with Albert, read this book over and over again, and gaze at her favorite illustration.

Suppressing her desire to play, Rosemary studied, practiced dancing, and learned courtly manners. The way she pressed forward so single-mindedly filled Albert with sadness. At the same time, he also studied and learned swordsmanship so that he could protect her. Everything he did was to fulfill their childhood promise.

Years later, Albert became a full-fledged knight. After finally being stationed in the capital for a short period of time, disquieting rumors began to circulate throughout the palace.

Rosemary—the crown prince’s bride-to-be—was inviting men into her private chambers.

No, that can’t be true.

Albert dismissed these claims as baseless rumors. *Anyone who knows Rosemary will see through these lies*, he thought. *The rumors will die down soon enough*. Plenty of people were envious of her position as the crown prince’s fiancée, after all. This was simply a result of their jealousy.

The following rumors spoke of Rosemary’s extravagant spending. Apparently, dressmakers and jewelers were visiting the palace at her behest.

Albert ignored these rumors as well, but his unease grew. Even so, he could do nothing as a new knight. He simply presented himself for duty when ordered and occasionally left the capital on expeditions. Still worried, he visited Rosemary between missions. Each time she greeted him with a smile, assuring him that nothing was wrong.

Of course, Rosemary had merely been putting on a brave face. He foolishly hadn’t realized that at the time. She hadn’t wanted him—an essentially novice

knight—to worry. Alas, he hadn't been able to recognize her kindness.

After returning from a lengthy expedition, Albert had already been too late. Rosemary had been imprisoned for treason and attempted murder. Her execution would take place soon.

He was shocked by this violent turn of events. Albert tried to protest, only for his boss to stop him.

"I'm sorry, but you're too late," the high commander said. "You have no choice but to endure this. Should you resist, you will be executed as well."

In response to this threat, Albert crumpled on the spot, bursting into tears. What did his execution matter? He just wanted to save Rosemary.

"Well then, you'll have to protect me when I become the princess," she'd once said.

Albert had failed to keep his promise.

Fearing that Albert might pry open the locked door and barge into the castle dungeon, the high commander placed him under house arrest, confining him within a pitch-black room. This was the correct decision. If Albert hadn't been detained, he would have done just that. He was no expert strategist. He couldn't think of any other way to save Rosemary.

As self-condemnation gnawed at Albert in the darkness, Reynaldo Hubert—Albert's childhood friend and Rosemary's younger brother—visited him. Reynaldo had the same golden hair and jade eyes as his sister. When Albert had last seen him, Reynaldo still possessed an air of youthfulness. Now, his eyes had turned so icy that he hardly seemed like the same person. His slow gait radiated frigid beauty, reminding Albert of a specter.

"I want to save Rosemary," Reynaldo spoke softly. Despite his voice being in the midst of breaking, it echoed with determination. "You'll help me, won't you?"

Reynaldo held out his small hand. Albert imagined himself entering into a contract with the sort of demon that appeared in stories. He couldn't put into words the magnitude of this salvation. Powerless and confined to his room, Albert had come to terms with his own insignificance. In the midst of this,

Reynaldo's proposal offered him liberation. If demons existed, he would gladly enter into a contract with one.

Albert gripped the younger boy's hand. "I accept, Master Reynaldo."

Become a knight like the one in this book.

Recalling his former promise, Albert nodded to a phantom of Rosemary, who smiled within the depths of his memories.

I'll keep my word. Once I become the knight you desire, I'll swear my loyalty to you once again. No matter what position I'm in. No matter if I'm branded a traitor. I'll do whatever it takes to save you, Rosemary—my precious lady and liege.

This was Albert's single purpose in life, for he loved Rosemary with all his heart.



I'D been dreaming while riding in the carriage. When we finally arrived at our destination, I gazed absentmindedly at the town surrounding the castle.

Lately, I often dreamed of Rosemary's life when I slept. A great deal of her memories came back to me in sudden flashes. While some felt similar to reading them in a book, others felt as though I'd experienced them firsthand. And of course, I regained some of her memories through dreaming.

What a nostalgic dream. To think, Rosemary and I loved the same book.

Though we were the same person, she was also a stranger to me. Finding things we shared made me happy.

"C'mon, we're here," Stanley said.

Irritated, my brother offered me his hand from outside the carriage. I accepted his support and disembarked, saying thanks for his more or less gentlemanly behavior.

Crowds of diverse people traveled up and down the roads of the castle town, whose prosperity eclipsed Edigma. After being let down onto the carriage road, I hurried after Stanley, luggage in my arms.

Under my brother's guidance, I entered the royal castle. When I showed my invitation to the guards at the gate, they let us through without any trouble. "Cute little sister you've got there," one of the guards familiar with Stanley called out to him in a friendly manner.

Other women entered the castle here and there. They all appeared to have received similar invitations. Every single one of them wore a beautiful dress. On the other hand, I'd chosen a much simpler dress from my everyday wardrobe.

According to the invitation, we would begin working as handmaids today. Thus, Stanley and I separated, since the women were scheduled to receive our instructions as a group.

"Try not to cause me any grief," Stanley said.

After receiving this most unhelpful advice, I joined the other women, who were gathered in an open space inside the castle. Looking around, this group clearly hadn't been assembled to recruit handmaids. I recognized some of them, but many others were unfamiliar. Either way, all of us were close to marriageable age.

Someone in the open space announced that the orientation would soon begin. I spent the rest of the day listening intently to directions as best I could.



A few days had passed since I'd started working as a palace handmaid, and I'd witnessed quite a few things. By this, I was referring to the corruption in the palace.

After receiving our instructions, the women were assigned to individual roles. Since then, the corruption I'd seen firsthand had been intolerable. First of all, King Grey and Queen Tia—who'd once been madly in love—now seemed to hate each other. Both were surrounded by paramours and engaged in depravity.

The king is allowed to have concubines, but the same shouldn't be true of the queen.

I was shocked that the queen brazenly surrounded herself with paramours without reproach. Grey had once shouted, "Tia has shown me true love!" at

Rosemary. Where had *that* man gone?

The internal politics are bleak as well.

The court was split into two factions, whose opposition was plain as day. First were the marquis households, whose leader served as prime minister. Second were the duke and viscount households, many of whose members served as court ministers. These two factions were engaged in a cold war under the surface.

Additionally, I found out the reason behind this whole fiancée commotion. When a certain marquis household advocated for their daughter to become the crown prince's bride, a ducal household fired back, "Don't be absurd! Our daughter is a far better match for Prince Rizel!" In the end, someone had concocted the outlandish scheme to choose fiancée candidates from handmaids.

And that's why a low-risk, country noblewoman like me received an invitation.

Other young ladies of similar circumstances packed every corner of the castle. Though our ostensible position was that of handmaids, we were actually prospective fiancées. Blatantly introducing possible wives to the prince would have further provoked the factional strife, ending in deadlock. However, as the court silently watched and waited over the years, the crown prince had reached marriageable age. Ultimately, this produced the current situation.

Young women from various regions filled the palace, performing their duties as handmaids haphazardly. Every day, women clawed tooth and nail to brew the prince tea, bring him food, or prepare his clothes.

I stayed out of harm's way, performing my job with the other women who wanted no part in the conflict. "Our numbers might have increased, but we have even more work to do," the original handmaids had complained. After learning the ropes from them, I went about my job quietly.

"If not for the whole fiancée uproar, this would be the perfect workplace."

As we cleaned the library, Nicky Tazyliya—the fourth daughter of Count Tazyliya—and I chatted.

Nicky was higher ranked than me, but the two of us had struck up a friendship

since we were both from the countryside. Before long, we'd become close enough to chat between jobs. Like everyone else, Nicky had been summoned to the capital as a prospective fiancée, but she had a secret boyfriend back home. So she performed her handmaid duties alongside me, opting not to participate in the commotion.

Her three older sisters were all married. That's why she'd been forced to participate to balance out the numbers. Even so, her parents had no interest in the crown.

"Palace handmaids are treated well, and the food is amazing," Nicky said. "And we get to see the latest fashions and can even visit the theater on our days off."

It made me laugh when she was so blunt about what she wanted. "But aren't you lonely without your boyfriend?"

From what I'd heard, he was a soldier from her hometown.

"Yes, but I want to live life to the fullest while I still can!" Nicky exclaimed. "Once we have children, I won't have time for this anymore."

Nicky just turned seventeen. She was one year younger than me and wanted to enjoy her youth. Still, I couldn't help but like her since she did her work without cutting corners.

"Speaking of which, have you met the prince?" Nicky asked me while cleaning the windows.

I shook my head. Of course, she meant Crown Prince Rizel Dirésias, who was suffering the most due to this commotion.

"I glimpsed him from afar on the first day, but I haven't seen him since," Nicky said.

The prince had gone into hiding, presumably to protect himself from the onslaught of women. Like terrifying beasts of prey, they hunted the prince, all hoping to become his bride.

I do feel sorry for him.

While Rizel's parents indulged in their affairs, women were simultaneously

hounding him for marriage. I sympathized with the prince, who could end up hating women under these circumstances.

After regaining Rosemary's memories, I was reluctant to visit the royal palace at first. What would happen to me if I crossed paths with the king who'd condemned Rosemary? Worse, what if I came face to face with Queen Tia? However, these had been needless worries. When I'd glimpsed King Grey from afar, my only thought had been, "Oh, so that's Rosemary's former fiancé." His lined face merely reminded me of how much time had passed. Not a single trace of longing or bitterness had arisen inside me.

Rosemary never loved him, did she?

If she *had* loved him, I might have felt resentment and regret. Yet my chest hadn't tightened in pain as I'd expected it to. To my surprise, I'd accepted the murder of my past self as though it had happened to someone else. Perhaps Rosemary and I were different people after all. Or maybe Rosemary held no ill will against Grey.

If I had to guess, it's probably the latter.

Oddly enough, I was satisfied with that.

Even so, I wanted to keep as much distance as possible. I wasn't foolish enough to harbor affection for the man who'd killed my past self. The corrupt politics of the castle only intensified this sentiment. *Hopefully, His Highness finds his fiancée as soon as possible so that I can go home.* Until then, I would tend to my work. With this in mind, I put even more effort into polishing the desk in front of me.



AT the age of twelve, Reynaldo Hubert witnessed his older sister, Rosemary's, execution. At the same time, the kingdom stripped away his father's rank of marquis, demoted him to viscount, and reclaimed a portion of the Hubert lands. Later, Reynaldo's older brother succeeded their father, and the Huberts—having lost this power struggle—were forced into a life of shame.

Yet ten years later, an omen presented itself. A coalition of small tribes, which had been scattered around the perimeter of Dirésias Kingdom, united and

attacked the country's northern region. The enemy captured the count in charge of defending this region and stole his territory in the blink of an eye.

At the time, a chronic illness had left the king bedridden. Having just succeeded his father, Prince Grey was unaccustomed to leadership. Under the orders of the prime minister, various counts, and other vassals, he dispatched a group of knights to reclaim the northern territory. But it required a protracted war.

Soldiers and civilians both began to tire, and a force under unexpected leadership reclaimed the northern region. While the small tribes and the kingdom's chivalric order fought for control of the northern fortress, Reynaldo Hubert displayed unrivaled skill and infiltrated enemy territory with a contingent of spies.

Reynaldo disguised himself as a nobleman from a neighboring country that was on poor terms with Dirésias. Then he negotiated with the coalition of small tribes. He offered to fight alongside them and defeat Dirésias.

Dirésias had no commercial ties with this decoy nation, so Reynaldo secretly conducted trade with them. After building a solid relationship with them, Reynaldo carried out his plan with their cooperation. He posed as one of their noblemen and secured an audience with the enemy's leader.

He gained the leader's trust. Then Reynaldo executed him.

The sudden loss of their leader left the small tribes in disarray. Reynaldo crushed the coalition of tribes with the aid of the chivalric order's second division vice captain, striking down their military encampments.

In the end, Reynaldo reclaimed the stolen land, with the northern fort being the main prize. After negotiating with the neighboring country, Reynaldo also divided the spoils with them proportionately. Namely, the land that once belonged to the small tribes.

In honor of this achievement, Reynaldo received a new rank as well as the northern territories. He abandoned the surname Hubert and became known as Reynaldo Rose. Obviously, as a tribute to his beloved sister. This caused some nobles to raise their eyebrows, but no one dared argue in light of Reynaldo's grand achievements.

The ceremony where Reynaldo received his new peerage took place in the royal castle.

“Why did you choose this name?” the king asked.

“So that I never forget past mistakes,” Reynaldo answered without hesitation.

Some were moved by his words. “How magnificent of him to serve the crown without forgetting his family’s crimes,” they said. But a small number of people knew the truth. The actual meaning of Reynaldo’s words had been, “So that I never forget *the royal family’s* past mistakes.”

Both a warning and a threat.

Albert McClain, the second division’s vice captain, shared Reynaldo’s grand achievement. He was promoted to vice-commander of the chivalric order. However, when the former king perished, the high commander also retired. So Albert claimed the title of high commander at an exceptionally young age.

The name Reynaldo Rose became synonymous with *hero*. Years later, he continued to preside over the still-flourishing north. Even in the royal capital, the rose seal representing his territory became a popular decoration.

Reynaldo still traded with the neighboring country regularly, and all who knew him there feared him. After all, Reynaldo had incited the small tribes to rebellion, plunging his own kingdom into chaos without anyone’s knowledge. Despite posing as the savior of Dirésias, he was the root of many evils and had driven his country to the brink of destruction.

This ingenious strategy had been concocted by a young man who had only recently turned twenty-two. While this terrified Reynaldo’s acquaintances in the neighboring country, none had the courage to confront him. Instead, they continued trading with him, never speaking a word on the matter.

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THE time finally arrived. Part of me thought this would never happen. I kept my head bowed and held my breath. King Grey and Queen Tia stood before my eyes. Furthermore, both of them radiated hostility.

“Visiting a new man today, are you?” the king asked. “You’re quite the refined

noblewoman, Tia.”

It's been a lifetime since I've heard him speak.

Nonetheless, his voice was carved into Rosemary's memories. Overdrinking had produced an unfamiliar hoarseness, but the speaker could be none other than King Grey.

“You've found a new concubine as well, haven't you?” Tia responded scathingly. “Yet no matter how hard you try, none of these women ever bear you any children. Could there be some sort of *problem*, I wonder?”

Based on Rosemary's memories, Tia's voice had once sounded more charming. Years ago, she'd been a beautiful girl who aroused protective instincts in men. Now, her tone dripped with venom.

True to Tia's words, the king hadn't been blessed with children, despite having a large number of concubines. His only legitimate child, Prince Rizel, had been born to Tia. According to the terrifying rumors circulating throughout the palace, the queen had taken measures to prevent the concubines from bearing children.

A few of us handmaids had no choice but to bow our heads and wait for this chilly marital spat to end. Finally, it did. The king and queen disappeared into the distance, and an air of relief washed over us.

“What a shock!” Nicky spoke breathily. “They really don't get along, do they?”

My new friend blurted that out once the storm had passed.

Panicked, I clapped my hand over her mouth. “Keep quiet, Nicky. We don't know who's listening.”

With that warning, I removed my hand.

“I suppose you're right,” Nicky replied. “Still, it's disappointing. I admired them so much...”

For a time, people adored the grand love story between Lady Tia and Crown Prince Grey so much that it inspired a picture book. The two lovers were finally united after condemning the villainess Rosemary and overcoming adversity. As the masses celebrated Tia and Grey's victory, the couple's wedding ceremony

took place. Indeed, a picture book with a similar story—the names and setting changed slightly—had been popular for a short time.

“Love is truly dead.” Nicky sighed.

Wait, don't you have a boyfriend? If your expectations are too high, it will only lead to disappointment. I kept that thought to myself.

“Don't you feel the same way?” Nicky asked.

“Oh, um, not really.”

“You're so cold! Do you even know how popular you are? People are always asking me why you don't have a boyfriend.”

I responded to Nicky's grumbling with a bemused smile.

She and I weren't the only women who had renounced our implicit positions as the crown prince's fiancée candidates. Other such women had started looking for potential husbands who matched their station. After all, plenty of highborn, single men lived in the royal capital. In the month since I'd started working at the castle, many couples had formed.

As Nicky had said, men had already approached me. Perhaps I looked like a good potential wife because I worked so hard. Or perhaps this made my disinterest in the crown prince obvious. In any case, more than a few men had used my diligence as an excuse to approach me. Regardless, I turned them away, unable to feel any excitement over the prospect.

“Is there anyone you're interested in?” Nicky asked.

“Not at all. I don't feel like entertaining any courtships.”

“Are you sure that's wise?”

Marriageable age was from one's late teens until twenty. Currently, I was eighteen years old. In other words, now would be the best time to consider marriage. However, I couldn't bring myself to care. *Maybe someday*, I would think, but it felt as though I were contemplating a matter entirely unrelated to myself.

Perhaps I learned my lesson during my life as Rosemary.

Before dying at sixteen, Rosemary had spent more of her life betrothed than not. By the time she became aware as a young child, she'd already been the crown prince's fiancée. Moreover, she'd been raised to think of herself as the future queen. Since Rosemary and I were one, my memories of being discarded at the end of my past life had likely become a source of trauma.

Not to mention Rosemary's childhood love of knights.

Knights always reminded Rosemary of playing with her childhood friend as a young girl. Beyond that, she'd admired knights far more than princes. Portraits of knights swearing loyalty to their lieges and wielding swords to protect them had always entranced her. She'd often forced her younger brother and childhood friend to *play knight* with her.

During work, I came upon a list of knights and made a discovery. Even after Rosemary's death, her childhood friend—who had played with her so patiently—still belonged to the chivalric order. I spoke the name written at the top of the list aloud, tracing it with a finger.

“Albert...”

Albert McClain had been Rosemary's childhood friend as well as her one and only knight.

Of course, Nicky wouldn't ignore the name I'd spoken of unconsciously. “Are you referring to Sir McClain?” she asked, her face drawing closer to mine.

Now I've done it.

“You're talking about Sir Albert McClain, aren't you?” Nicky pressed. “Wait, do you have a thing for older men?”

“N-No, I don't!”

My flushed-face denial wasn't the least bit convincing. All the same, I couldn't hide how much seeing his name had shaken me. I'd even spoken it out loud.

“How old is Sir McClain again?” Nicky asked. Eager to discuss romance with me, her speech accelerated. “I believe he's thirty-six. He's the high commander of the knights and still unmarried. I totally understand why you'd have a crush on him!”

“Um, a crush...?”

I’d said his name out of nostalgia. But of course, I couldn’t be honest about that.

“You should’ve said something earlier!” Nicky cried. “I can’t believe you like Sir McClain!”

She’s not going to listen to me, is she...?

I had no time to protest. Rather, I could only wait for Nicky to calm down.

“Oh, right!” she continued shouting. “He’s probably there right now. Come with me.”

Nicky grabbed my arm and started running. Somehow, I avoided tripping and followed after her.

“This is dangerous!” I called out. “We shouldn’t be running!”

Handmaids running in the middle of the palace? It’s unheard of.

When I tried to protest again, Nicky covered *my* mouth this time.

“Look, he’s over there,” she said.

From behind the bushes, I followed her line of sight. She’d led me to the chivalric order’s training grounds. Their spacious building was a short distance from the central palace. I’d only seen this building once, so I hadn’t remembered its location. Nicky had apparently visited it many times. She seemed in her element, watching the training grounds, where dozens of knights practiced their swordsmanship. Among their number, I spotted a familiar knight from Rosemary’s memories.

Oh...!

I trembled. Though I hadn’t seen him since before Rosemary’s death, his olive brown hair hadn’t changed. Even after twenty years, traces of the face from my memories still remained in his features.

Albert...

Rosemary’s memories and emotions flooded my mind. Tears welled up in the corners of my eyes. I couldn’t stop them.

The man before me had a trained physique and a dignified bearing. During our time apart, he'd long since become an adult, possessing the masculinity of a man past thirty. This knight—with the medal on his chest proclaiming him as the high commander—was Rosemary's childhood friend Albert.

I'd never met him during this lifetime, but the nostalgia caused my emotions to run haywire. Seeing his face filled me with joy.

Nicky beamed at me, having misunderstood my tears. "If you're happy enough to cry, it was definitely worth bringing you here."

I wanted to argue, but I couldn't say anything. I was too overjoyed. During my time as Rosemary, he'd been my attendant. Now, our positions had changed.

Rosemary's memories bloomed inside me, all of them adoring this man. When I saw Grey not long ago, I hadn't felt the slightest trace of emotion, yet a mere glimpse of Albert filled me with glee. It was the first time this had happened since I remembered my past life.

"He's handsome and high-ranking," Nicky said. "He might be on the older side, but he's still popular considering how gorgeous he is. All that aside, a girl like you could definitely win his heart, Mary!"

Nicky's enthusiastic support caused me to laugh. It had only increased her excitement when I got overwhelmed by emotions. I could no longer deny having romantic feelings for Albert, and thus, I simply offered my thanks. After all, Nicky had given me this opportunity to see him.

"Is someone there?" a man's voice asked.

While we were talking, Albert suddenly appeared in front of us. Perhaps he'd sensed a suspicious presence and came to check. I'd been too absorbed in my conversation with Nicky to notice. Or maybe he was so stealthy that I wouldn't have sensed him coming either way. Such a feat would be easy enough for someone like Albert.

Panicked, I bowed my head. "I sincerely apologize for interrupting your training!"

As I offered this hurried contrition, a flustered Nicky also bowed her head.

“Oh, you’re palace handmaids,” Albert replied. “Did you have some business here?”

Still on high alert, Albert posed this question in a cold tone, although he sounded calmer than before. While his voice matched the one from my memories, he spoke with a deeper tenor than he had during his youth.

I was still considering how to respond when Nicky pressed onward. “Um, we were waiting here because we wanted to offer our service to the knights!”

Huh?

What in the world was Nicky talking about? Albert and I were probably staring at her with the same expression. Conversely, Nicky had the baffling words “You can count on me!” written across her face.

Grinning from ear to ear, Nicky looked back and forth between Albert and me.

“Sir McClain!” she cried. “Would you please hire us as handmaids to the chivalric order?”

Usually, I appreciate a proactive woman, but at that moment, Nicky’s recklessness stunned me into silence.

* * *

“PLEASE, Reynaldo. If nothing else, I want you to be happy.”

Reynaldo’s beloved sister stretched out her hand from behind the iron bars as she spoke.

Taking her hand, Reynaldo pressed his lips to her emaciated fingertips. “You ask too much of me, Rosemary.”

How could I be happy without you?

It was perhaps the hundredth time he’d said as much. Rosemary shook her head sadly. “Please, Reynaldo,” his beloved sister strained to speak. “Father will receive his judgment soon. At the very least, I want you to escape punishment.”

Reynaldo cared nothing for their so-called *father*, who had treated Rosemary so cruelly. The mere thought of him made Reynaldo’s skin crawl.

“I’ll stay by your side,” Reynaldo declared.

“Please, I beg of you!” Rosemary cried out in sorrow. “Don’t do anything rash!”

Reynaldo longed to grant each and every one of his sister’s wishes, but he couldn’t heed this one. If Rosemary was going to leave him, he’d rather die with her. She sensed his intent and was doing everything in her power to stop him. Even so, Reynaldo couldn’t back down. He considered Rosemary his only relative and sole source of support. They’d been born to different mothers, and soon after his birth, Reynaldo’s mother had abandoned him. Rosemary loved him as no one else had.

Their father had named his eldest son as his successor and tried to marry off his daughter to the crown prince for political gain. Reynaldo had been nothing more than insurance in case something ever happened to his older half-brother. As a young boy, Reynaldo had yearned for affection. Only his elder sister had ever reached out to him.

Rosemary had been thoroughly used by their father. And then her fiancé betrayed her, imprisoning her in a freezing dungeon. Reynaldo detested himself for being unable to save his sister.

Could I be any more worthless?

“Reynaldo.” Rosemary caressed his tear-stained cheek. “Don’t worry. I’ll always be by your side.”

Rosemary always said that to him while stroking his cheek on nights he’d spent crying due to loneliness.

“Good night, Reynaldo.” He recalled her saying. *“Your older sister will always be at your side.”*

“D-Don’t,” Reynaldo sobbed. “Don’t do this...”

Endless tears spilled from his eyes.

Don’t leave me behind. I love you more than I love anyone else, my precious Rosemary.

Right in front of him, Rosemary faded into the distance.

Ah, I must be dreaming, he realized, for the tears flowing down his face were

so horribly vivid. He couldn't reunite with Rosemary outside of sleep, after all. How he longed to see her again, if only in his dreams.

Sitting up in bed, Reynaldo placed a hand against his throbbing head. He lifted a water jug from his bedside table, poured the liquid into a glass, and gulped it down. Memories from over a decade ago still tormented him. At the same time, they also provided him with loving support.

After putting on his robe for going out, Reynaldo picked up the bouquet of flowers—which the butler prepared for him every day—and left his bedroom. He lived in an old, northern castle where he employed the fewest servants possible. Several years had passed since Reynaldo had established his own domain, and he considered the Rose region his home. If he didn't have to work in the capital, he spent most of his time in this castle, and while here, he kept to a strict morning routine. Thus, Reynaldo walked down the halls of his estate with a bouquet of flowers in hand, as he did every dawn.

Soon, he arrived at a separate building from the main estate. It was engraved with a rose-patterned coat of arms. He unlocked the door, descended into the basement, lit a candelabra, and continued forward. With every step, the air grew chillier.

His sister's remains lay within this underground room.

Though the castle servants knew this was a mausoleum, Reynaldo hadn't told anyone the identity of its occupant. Yet without fail, he brought flowers to her grave every dawn.

"Good morning, Rosemary," he said aloud.

A coffin rested beneath a stone statue sculpted in his sister's likeness. Following Rosemary's execution, Reynaldo and Albert stole her remains. For a while, Reynaldo had hidden her coffin in his villa, but after acquiring the Rose region, he'd constructed this mausoleum. Ever since then, her remains had been laid to rest here.

Reynaldo removed yesterday's flowers from Rosemary's casket and replaced them with the fresh bouquet. Visiting his sister each morning had become both a routine and a ritual for him.

“How would you like to punish those who killed you, Rosemary?” Every day, Reynaldo asked this question as part of his greeting. “Shall we hang them? Or should we decapitate them? Condemning them to forced labor as prisoners is a tempting idea, too.”

He wore an expression of childlike innocence as he listed off methods of vengeance. Anyone who knew Reynaldo Rose—called the *Ice Duke* by many—would be astonished to see this, as he usually gave off an air of composure.

“Now that my preparations are finally in place, I need only decide on the method.” Reynaldo placed a hand on his chin. “Try as I might, I can’t think of a method that would please you, Rosemary. More importantly, what would be the fun of ending things too quickly?”

His plans to slaughter the royal family had taken twenty years of preparation. All things considered, he would like to draw out their torture. Yes, his sister’s tormentors needed to suffer for as long as possible.

In the distance, a bell tolled the hour.

“I must take my leave now,” he said, “but I shall return on the morrow.”

Reynaldo bowed to the casket reverently and left the mausoleum. The sound of a bell still echoed in his ears. Even after all this time, the bell signaling Rosemary’s execution still haunted him. With tears streaming down her face, his sister had tried to call out to him. Her voice had barely reached his ears before she’d been executed.

This scene repeated unceasingly in Reynaldo’s mind.

Yet no matter how many times he recalled Rosemary’s hanging, a question always nagged at him. What had she been thinking to make her smile?

* * *

“I can’t believe that actually worked,” Nicky said.

“Should you be the one saying that?” I asked.

We were standing on the chivalric order’s training grounds, which we’d been spying on the other day. After Nicky had asked Albert to hire us, he had—to my great surprise—accepted.

“This is perfect timing,” he’d replied instantly. “Our last handmaids just quit on us, accusing the knights of being too barbaric as of late.”

That very day, Albert consulted with the officer managing the handmaids, who’d given his permission immediately. Apparently, Nicky and I could be excluded from the fiancée candidacy without issue owing to our provincial origins.

Inside and outside the palace, people had complained about the number of handmaids in the capital. Even under normal circumstances, chaos filled every corner of the palace. Now, the fiancée selection had led to an even greater ruckus.

Finally relaxing his guard, Albert wore a firm but gentle smile. “I look forward to working with you.”

“Yes, sir!” Nicky cried. “We won’t let you down!”

Between Albert and a grinning Nicky, I kept my head down and stayed silent. Albert didn’t know my true identity, but I still didn’t know how to interact with him. In my past life, we’d been childhood friends as well as having a master-servant relationship.

Furtively, I glanced up at Albert. He wore his olive brown hair cropped short, and his almond eyes were often criticized for their unfriendly appearance. Nevertheless, Albert was kind once you got to know him, despite giving off a rugged air. Furthermore, I had never seen him do anything boorish like raise his voice.

Back when I’d lived in the palace as the crown prince’s fiancée, I’d sometimes visit Albert, who’d still been an apprentice knight. Since then, he’d devoted himself to sword practice single-mindedly. As I recalled, he’d far outclassed his peers.

“Is something wrong?” Albert asked.

I’d been staring at him for too long.

“M-My name is Mary Edigma,” I stammered. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Flustered, I bowed my head, and beside me, I could *sense* Nicky grinning.

“Love at first sight, huh?” her smile seemed to suggest.

Obviously not. Okay, maybe a little.

“Mary...”

Albert muttered my name as if speaking to himself. He peered at my face. When our eyes met, nervousness coursed through me. After staring at me for a while, Albert smiled, his tension seeming to dissipate.

“My apologies,” he said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you as well, Lady Edigma.”

“Thank you.”

And so, I began working as a handmaid for the knights. Their building within the palace grounds—the training yard at its center—was quite spacious. While single knights stayed in the barracks, clerical work and strategizing were conducted in the offices. Lastly, knights on standby were stationed in the guardroom. Because the barracks were intended for single knights, women weren’t allowed to enter, meaning handmaids didn’t work there either. Nicky and I mostly performed our duties in the guardroom, the offices, and the training grounds.

“It looks like Sir McClain is going to be in his office today,” Nicky said. “Why don’t you take care of the work there?”

I didn’t say anything to Nicky as she skipped towards the training grounds. Instead, I quietly headed towards the offices to begin my work. When I knocked on the door and entered, I found Albert...no, *Sir McClain* at his desk.

“Welcome, Lady Edigma,” he said. “Thank you for helping out today.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

Due to the overwhelming power of Rosemary’s memories, Sir McClain’s first name always came to mind whenever I looked at him. However, now he outranked me. Fearful that I might call him *Albert* by accident, I always referred to him by title.

“Shall I brew you a cup of tea, Sir McClain?” I asked.

“That would be wonderful.”

I began preparing tea that would serve as a break from his paperwork.

Back when Rosemary worked at the palace, she often drank citrus tea with Albert during their breaks. I wonder if he still likes it.

I reminisced while I brewed the tea. Albert didn't appear to like office work; his brows were permanently furrowed as he looked over the documents. Hopefully, this would relieve his fatigue.

"Here's your tea," I said.

One corner of Albert's mouth quirked into a smile ever so slightly. "Thank you. It smells like oranges."

"I hope you enjoy it."

"I do like citrus tea, but it's been a long time since I've had any."

Apparently, he had fond memories of this drink as well. I bowed my head, a sense of satisfaction hidden away in my chest.

I'm glad your tastes haven't changed, Al— No, Sir McClain. Maybe next time, I could make those cashew pancakes that you used to adore.

As another memory from my past life occurred to me, I basked in nostalgia. At the same time, I had to hide my happiness when looking at him. In an attempt to suppress this cloying sentimentality, I bowed my head—as befitted a handmaid—and headed towards the door.

After leaving the office, a sense of buoyancy from having pleased Sir McClain carried me down the hallway. On the other side of the hall, a young man was standing by himself. I first assumed he was a knight. That would make sense given our location. But something about him seemed different. As such, I called out to him without much thought.

"May I help you with something?"

I couldn't see his face very well since his hat covered his eyes. He turned in my direction, and when he displayed a standoffish attitude, I grew more leery of him. He was acting far too suspiciously. I looked around to see if anyone was nearby, contemplating whether I should call for help.

"Sorry," the young man said, "but I'm not a suspicious person."

My expression must have betrayed my thoughts. Still, this quintessentially suspicious remark had only put me on higher alert. The young man seemed to immediately regret what he'd said. This, combined with his unexpectedly calm voice, helped alleviate my worries. If he *had* been an untrustworthy person, I would have sensed something from his tone, no matter how small. Conversely, he sounded more like a child fearful of a scolding.

I examined him again. He was a little taller than me, and despite his face being hidden, we looked to be around the same age. Though he had an athletic build, he didn't appear to be a knight.

"Do you have business with someone here?" I asked.

"Yes, I do."

His response demonstrated a strong will. Upon closer inspection, he appeared to be a nobleman. He wore a fine silk shirt, and his black trousers—which covered long, slender legs—had embroidery in difficult-to-see locations. Though his garments might have been light, he was clearly of high stature.

"If you'd like, I could show you to your destination," I said. "Also, I beg your pardon, but may I ask your name?"

Since he was a nobleman, I needed to be courteous. I conducted myself in a manner that wouldn't cause offense while compelling him to reveal his identity.

The door opened behind me. I turned to see Sir McClain standing there. In all likelihood, hearing our lengthy conversation next to his room had piqued his curiosity and drawn him outside.

Upon seeing the young man and me, he approached us with a surprised expression. "What are you doing here, Prince Razel?"

What? Did he just say Prince Razel?

Reflexively, I turned toward the young man. Seeming at a loss, he lifted the hat from his head, smiling awkwardly. He had the same blue eyes as Rosemary's former fiancé, who'd betrayed and imprisoned her.

Indeed, none other than Prince Razel stood before me.



RIZEL had been born to King Grey Dirésias and Queen Tia Danzes. As the only legitimate son of the king in the entire nation, Rizel had been raised with great care.

Much like a puppet would be.

Throughout his life, Rizel had been pampered, with numerous adults whispering in his ear, “Someday, you shall become king.” Yet, thanks to the small number of adults that he could confide in, he avoided becoming pompous and ignorant.

Specifically, he trusted two individuals. First was Albert McClain, high commander of the chivalric order and the prince’s bodyguard.

“A king should not be swayed by the opinions of those around him,” Albert told Rizel. “If you seek to inherit the throne, you must care for your people deeply. And not everything should be allowed to you simply because you are the prince.”

Thanks to Albert’s occasionally strict guidance, Rizel saw through the convenient words bandied about by the adults around him. Furthermore, Rizel respected Albert as a teacher, for the man also served as his sword instructor. For as long as he could remember, Rizel had admired Albert, who excelled at swordsmanship and never neglected hard work.

Rizel had also placed his trust in Duke Reynaldo Rose. His parents detested Reynaldo, so he hardly ever met the duke at the palace. However, during Rizel’s scholarly training, he’d stayed in regions outside the capital for a while. That was when he’d become acquainted with the duke. When Rizel had first met Reynaldo, the man’s piercing gaze had frightened him. Nevertheless, he’d learned a great deal from Reynaldo, and each time they’d spoken, the man had opened up to him.

At least, Rizel thought as much.

When the prince was nine years old, Reynaldo had accomplished a meritorious feat in service of the kingdom. After a group of small tribes had taken up arms in the northern region, Reynaldo had quashed their rebellion almost single-handedly. Albert had also contributed to this victory, and as a reward for their achievement, Reynaldo had received a higher rank and new

lands. Since then, the duke had enriched his domain beyond comparison, offering salvation to the kingdom's precarious finances. How could Rizel not admire him?

Despite Reynaldo's contributions to the kingdom, Rizel's parents always acted coldly towards the duke. This had created an even greater rift between the prince and his parents. The king and queen hated each other, and likewise, Rizel had no warm, familial memories associated with them. Honestly, he had little fondness for his mother or father. Rather, he felt ashamed of them for encouraging corrupt governance. Though Rizel made various attempts to fix things himself, few people would lend an ear to him, perhaps due to his young age.

Reynaldo also dismissed Rizel's attempts to better the kingdom. "The time is not yet ripe, my prince," he would say.

Rizel wasn't able to argue with the duke. He understood his lack of kingly prowess and charisma all too well. In fact, he longed to be a knight rather than a monarch. He wanted to become strong like Albert, but whenever he said this, it seemed to trouble the man.

"If I can't become a knight myself, would you swear loyalty to me?" Rizel asked of Albert, the man he so admired. "Having you by my side would greatly hearten me."

"Forgive me, but I have already sworn my loyalty to another," Albert refused.

"To whom did you pledge this oath?" Rizel asked, but Albert declined to answer.

It must be Reynaldo, Rizel decided for himself.

Because Rizel had spent time in their company, he knew that Albert and Reynaldo sometimes met in secret. Apparently, they'd grown up in the same region, having been friends since childhood. Reynaldo warned Rizel not to speak of these meetings, as doing so would weaken Albert's position as a servant to the royal family. Yes, some people might have known about Albert and Reynaldo's relationship implicitly, but they implored the prince not to speak about it publicly.

Rizel didn't understand a great many things: politics, human nature, and the bonds of family, for instance. He was aware of his youth and ignorance, so he decided to learn. Sometimes he couldn't understand a subject solely through books or his teachers' lectures. Then he would have to experience those things for himself. His vassals opposed it, but he ignored them and traveled across various regions, listening to the common folk directly. The more knowledgeable he grew, the more ashamed he became of his parents' foolishness. While his father forced all political responsibility onto his vassals, his mother held lavish parties within the castle and exhausted their wealth.

His parents' extramarital affairs throughout his adolescence caused him to swear to never act like them. He'd grown averse to romance for two reasons: First, due to his parents' influence. Second, because he understood—being a perceptive young man—that women only viewed him as the prince.

People never looking beyond Rizel's station was inevitable. Likewise, political marriages were natural for someone in his position. He accepted these facts of life, but was too young to make his emotions conform to his understanding. If he'd been betrothed from an early age like his father, perhaps he could have come to terms with his circumstances more decisively.

Before marrying Queen Tia, King Grey had been engaged to another woman. Her name had been Rosemary Hubert, the daughter of Marquis Hubert. She'd also been the older half-sister of Reynaldo.

Marquis Hubert had pursued political power feverishly, his desires plain as day. Regardless, his ability to expand the nation had been outstanding. By having his daughter engaged to the prince, the marquis should have gained unshakeable political might. However, history took a drastic turn when Count Danzes—an advisor to the king and member of the conservative faction—installed his daughter as Prince Grey's handmaid. His daughter's name had been Tia Danzes. In other words, Rizel's mother had served as his father's handmaid.

Tia's youthful features belied her true age. She had a high soprano voice, and she was a little shorter than average. These traits aroused protective instincts in men, and few of them could resist her charms.

Prince Grey fell for Tia. The prince then condemned Rosemary, whose ill

repute had been trending upward, within the audience chamber. Later, a furious Rosemary was arrested for the attempted murder of Tia, and in the end, she was hanged. At the same time, Marquis Hubert's illegal activities had come to light. His formidable political authority didn't save the marquis from being demoted in rank or having his lands seized. Afterwards, he'd disappeared from politics entirely.

These scandalous anecdotes about the king and queen had been suppressed. Even Razel hadn't heard them from his parents. His teachers taught him these stories in secret. He'd also read about them in books containing records of their nation's history.

After hearing rumors about Marquis Hubert and Rosemary, Razel pestered one of his teachers with questions about them. In response, the teacher explained them to him under the promise that Razel would never repeat the details elsewhere. Nevertheless, the teacher had only given him a summary. Razel wanted to know more, so he sought out written accounts for himself.

The documents had been hidden deep within the library, and thus, Razel hadn't learned the details until he was eighteen. Additionally, he'd asked Duke Reynaldo about the man's older sister only once. At the time, Razel's desire for the truth had gotten the better of him, but in retrospect, this had been a foolish thing to do. Reynaldo's piercing gaze had surpassed even his moniker as the Ice Duke.

"Never speak to me of this again," Reynaldo had demanded, saying nothing else.

Since then, Razel was afraid to broach the subject again. Needless to say, he regretted his careless remark two years ago.

Rosemary had even been depicted as a villainess in picture books. And yet, she'd also been the older sister of Razel's trusted confidant and his father's former fiancée.

What kind of person was she, I wonder...?

Not a single written account of her description had survived. Thus, Razel could do naught but imagine her.



HAD Sir McClain just referred to the suspicious person in front of me as Prince Razel? I couldn't believe my ears. What was the prince doing in the chivalric order's section of the palace?

But when I look closer, he does resemble King Grey.

Based on Rosemary's memories, I compared Razel's face to those of his parents. Yes, his features contained traces of both Grey and Tia. In particular, his blue eyes—the symbol of the royal family—shone like sapphires. He wore his long, slightly reddish hair in a ponytail, the color taking after his mother's.

"Sorry for the sudden visit, Albert," the prince apologized, squeezing the hand holding his hat. "Do you mind hiding me?"

His troubled blue eyes, appealing to Sir McClain, gave rise to a protective urge inside me.

He's inherited that from his mother as well!

"Come on in." Sir McClain sighed loudly, showing Prince Razel into his office. "Do you mind making us tea, Lady Edigma?"

I hurried out of the office to fulfill his request. After preparing the pot and leaves, I artfully brewed the tea and poured it into cups. When I announced to the servants' room that Sir McClain had a guest, they even provided me with cookies. Though I didn't reveal the guest's identity, the other servants seemed to know who he was. In other words, Prince Razel visited often.

When I returned to the office, Prince Razel was sitting on the guest sofa, while Sir McClain sat on the opposite-facing sofa. I handed the tea to both of them, and the prince spoke to me.

"You must be the new handmaid."

I shot up straight and bowed deeply. "My name is Mary Edigma. I sincerely apologize for my earlier rudeness."

"No need for apologies. I was the one acting suspiciously, but even so, you still responded politely. Thank you for that. My name is Razel Dirésias. You needn't act so formally either. I'll be visiting Albert like this often."

"I would prefer it if you came here less," Sir McClain replied.

The prince chuckled. "No need to be so hard on me."

His courteousness surprised me a little. Actually, it surprised me a lot.

What a mature young man.

He was at least more respectable than King Grey, with whom I'd spent a great deal of time during my past life. Prince Razel's polite demeanor and the way in which he didn't look down on his interlocutors—regardless of their station—endeared me to him.

"So?" Sir McClain asked. "Why are you here, Prince Razel? The civil servants have told you time and time again not to leave the castle, have they not?"

The prince drained his tea in a single gulp, irritated. "Must you even ask? The castle has grown so stifling that I might suffocate in there."

I can't blame him, what with the horde of handmaids clawing to become his bride.

The prince might as well have been ordered to let a pack of hyenas devour him.

Sir McClain didn't look up from the documents on his desk as he spoke. "Then why don't you decide on a fiancée as soon as possible?"

"The last person I want to hear that from is a thirty-year-old bachelor." The prince grabbed a cookie and tossed it in his mouth. He then picked up another cookie and held it in my direction. "Would you like one?"

"Forgive me, but no," I politely declined. "I appreciate the offer, but I'm working."

The prince laughed innocently. "Serious one, aren't you?"

He's quite the flirt.

By all appearances, he'd inherited Queen Tia's charm in spades. Hopefully, this wouldn't grow into anything sinister.

"I *am* thinking about my future fiancée," the prince said to Sir McClain. "But I want to consider the matter carefully so that I don't end up like my parents."

“That’s wise,” Sir McClain replied. “I would prefer that you didn’t waste our nation’s money on frivolities as they do.”

Sir McClain’s brazen criticism of the prince’s parents surprised me, but it looked like this was a routine conversation for them. They carried on without issue.

“Can you imagine the chaos if either of my parents had another child after all this time?” the prince asked. “I would appreciate it if they practiced a little moderation.”

Sir McClain nodded. “That’s why the civil servants have resorted to such drastic measures to see you married as soon as possible.”

By *drastic measures*, he was probably referring to the hectic appointment of so many handmaids.

Prince Rizel’s aura turned dangerous. “Are you telling me to make the same mistake as my father?”

He must know about Queen Tia having been a handmaid, I realized.

I could still recall the first day that Tia had appeared before Rosemary. She had smiled while bowing to my past self, her demeanor not resembling that of a handmaid in the slightest. All the while, her reserved gaze betrayed her contempt. Yet by the time Rosemary realized how dangerous Tia was, Prince Grey had already succumbed to her wiles. At that point, anything Rosemary had said to him had fallen on deaf ears.

If she had acted sooner, would things have turned out differently?

No amount of wondering would change the past.

“I don’t want to make the same mistake as my father,” the prince reiterated.

It sounded as though he didn’t want to fall in love with a handmaid and take her as his bride. This brought a question to my mind.

“Prince Rizel,” I said. “With all due respect, would you permit me to speak?”

I might have sounded impertinent, but as a formerly involved party, my advice could be of service to the prince. I waited for his response. If he didn’t give me permission, I would remain silent. Yet, in response to my impudent

remark, the prince turned towards me curiously, his expression not at all displeased. In fact, Sir McClain seemed more surprised than the prince.

“Please speak your mind,” Prince Rizel allowed.

“Thank you very much.” I looked the prince over once more. “When you say *your father’s mistake*, are you referring to him having an intimate relationship with a handmaid?” I didn’t believe that was a mistake. Prince Grey had erred in one other significant way. “Or was it a mistake to become intimate with another woman when he already had a fiancée?”

“Interesting question,” the prince responded. “In my opinion, both could be considered mistakes, but do you think otherwise?”

“Indeed.”

What was Grey’s mistake, exactly?

“Despite being royalty, King Grey acted without considering the consequences of his decisions,” I said. “That was his true mistake.”

During her lifetime, Rosemary had said this to Grey many times.

“Please reconsider, Prince Grey,” Rosemary had implored him. “If you wish to marry Lady Tia, please listen to me.”

She hadn’t been obstructing Tia and Grey’s love. No, Rosemary had beseeched Grey countless times to make the correct decision as the prince. Unfortunately, none of her words had ever resonated with him.

“Silence!” Grey had shouted. “You just want to tear Tia and me apart!”

“I have no such intention,” Rosemary had answered. “Please, just listen to me.”

A single action of the prince’s drastically changed the monarchy’s political structure. The king’s position came apart at the seams, and Count Danzes—a member of the conservative faction—gained greater influence. This also fractured relationships with the neutralist faction. Before, Marquis Hubert had been quite influential, but after the engagement between Rosemary and Prince Grey had been called off, the scales maintaining equilibrium had become unbalanced. This delicate matter had required an amicable solution.

“If this continues, my father won’t remain silent,” Rosemary had said. “Please allow me to arrange a meeting between my father and Count Danzes.”

“Do you take me for a fool?!” Prince Grey had roared. “Why would I allow Marquis Hubert into a place where he might entrap Tia?”

“I beg of you, my prince. Please have mercy on the people living in the Hubert domain!”

If the marquis’ political authority wavered, this would significantly impact the region under his control.

Fed up with the conversation, Prince Grey brushed Rosemary’s hand aside and marched down the corridor.

“Please, Prince Grey!”

Even after her death, Rosemary’s plaintive cry never reached him. The past was set in stone, but her memory of shouting at the prince’s back still caused my chest to ache.

But I can change the present.

“But a discerning young man such as yourself should have no trouble considering the consequences of his actions,” I told Prince Rizel. “For the sake of your people, please choose a good fiancée.”

I smiled at the prince. He wouldn’t make the same mistake as his father. In a sense, I was entrusting him with Rosemary’s unfulfilled wish, hoping he would forge a better future.

In response, he stared at me, dumbfounded.

“Um, Prince Rizel?” I asked.

Had I overstepped myself? His unresponsiveness worried me. Perhaps I *had* been too impertinent.

“That was rude of me,” I said. “Please forgive my—”

“Lady Mary Edigma.”

When the prince finally spoke, I looked up in relief only to find him staring at me, his face bright red. His sparkling, sapphire eyes starkly contrasted his

flushed cheeks.

“Um, may I call you Mary?” he asked.

As the prince looked at me with a newly passionate gaze, his features aroused my protective instincts again. Apparently, my words produced a less-than-desirable result.

* * *

SOMETIME after Albert had been promoted to high commander of the chivalric order, his thoughts turned to Reynaldo. Over a decade had passed since they’d sworn to save Rosemary, and currently, Albert didn’t understand the thinking behind Reynaldo’s actions.

Rosemary had been Reynaldo’s older sister and the woman to whom Albert had pledged his loyalty. Thus, Albert felt no allegiance towards the Dirésias Kingdom, which had framed and executed her. On the contrary, he despised this nation. So Albert always found Reynaldo’s orders incomprehensible. After Rosemary’s execution, Albert considered leaving the knights, but Reynaldo had given him different instructions.

“Continue serving the chivalric order,” Reynaldo had told him. “Someday, there will come a time when I will call upon your strength.”

A few years later, Albert and the unit under his command fought alongside Reynaldo to reclaim the northern territory. Naturally, they’d both been rewarded for this. Albert had even been promoted to high commander of the chivalric order.

“Serve Prince Rizel as his knight,” Reynaldo had ordered him next. “Do your best to earn his trust.”

And so, Albert looked after Prince Rizel—who’d been dangerously close to becoming a puppet—as his personal bodyguard. As children so often did, the prince absorbed knowledge like a sponge. Taking advantage of this, Albert directed the prince into possessing a strong will of his own. Furthermore, he’d taught the prince what ideals were most important to a ruler.

Albert had first learned these ideals from Rosemary.

In other words, Albert had taught Rosemary's values to the son of her betrayers. This, itself, had been a form of revenge for Albert. At the same time, this would have been Rosemary's dearest wish. She would have approved of Albert's actions.

In the end, Albert had gained the prince's trust. Seeing how Prince Razel idolized honesty and purity, Albert concluded that children were innocent of their parents' crimes. Albert even began to care about the prince. Though he loathed the boy's parents enough to kill them, the prince himself had committed no crime.

In all likelihood, Reynaldo didn't feel the same way. On the surface, he seemed to be protecting the prince, but he had other intentions. In Albert's estimation, Reynaldo probably planned to use the prince as a pawn in his revenge, despite having commanded Albert to protect him for all these years.

Reynaldo and Albert shared the same desire for revenge. Even so, proximity to Prince Razel had caused Albert to care for the boy. If Reynaldo ordered Albert to kill Razel, would he be able to turn his sword on the prince?

Albert's heart and loyalty ultimately belonged to Rosemary. If she were here and ordered him to kill Prince Razel, he would probably do so, albeit with some hesitancy.

But she would never give me such an order.

Even after Rosemary had been betrayed and murdered, Albert couldn't imagine her ordering him to kill an innocent child. From a young age, she'd been raised as the future queen. She suppressed her emotions, cared for her people, and sometimes showed admiration for knights.

What would Rosemary think if she were alive today?

Every time Albert thought of Rosemary, his heart ached with regret. In all likelihood, she would plead with him to abandon his revenge and live for the future. But Albert couldn't forsake his revenge, no matter what Rosemary might have wished for. When Albert saw her hanging from the gallows, the flames of vengeance ignited in his heart. This wrathful fire burned within him even now. It would continue blazing for all eternity.

I cannot forgive the king and queen.

No, not the two people who wounded Rosemary and left her to die. Knights existed to protect their country, but Albert's loyalty lay with Rosemary.

When Albert received matchmaking letters endorsed by the king or his vassals, he turned each and every one of them down. Those who sought revenge had no need for family. Albert's obsession with Rosemary probably made the king and his close associates fear rebellion from him. To the best of his ability, Albert acted as if he felt nothing for Rosemary, but their childhood friendship was common knowledge.

Reynaldo had told Albert to continue serving the chivalric order to gain the trust of both the prince and the nation. Albert knew nothing of his friend's reasons. In matters of strategy, Reynaldo had been hailed as a prodigy since childhood. As such, Albert entrusted the scheming to him.

Conversely, Albert had only been able to offer his sword to Rosemary. All these years, he'd kept his vow of loyalty by guarding the citizens she'd wanted to protect. He did this for the people, not for the monarchy. Since Albert could do nothing but wield a sword and reminisce about Rosemary, this had been his final decision.

Reynaldo was different. Albert couldn't tell what his friend was thinking. By all appearances, he'd lived this long solely to enact his revenge. Albert didn't doubt this in the slightest. Still, once Reynaldo fulfilled his goal, what would become of him?

He would probably end his own life.

And what of myself?

What did Albert plan to do after exacting revenge? He had no answer. After ten years spent thinking of nothing but vengeance, he no longer remembered what had once brought him happiness.

Just like Reynaldo, Albert had lived through these years as if under a curse.

* * *

ALLOW me to present you with a problem. In your past life, you were

murdered. After being reborn, the son of your former killer appears in front of you. What's more, that young man proposes to you.

Now, how would you respond?

With a "no," of course!

As my mind attempted to flee reality, I brought myself back to earth with an internal quip.

How much time had passed since Prince Rizel had taken me along for his conversational detour? Eventually, he'd left the room while I stood there, stock still, dumbfounded. Only two people now remained in the office: Sir McClain—who'd helped me sit down—and my confused mess of a self.

I couldn't explain how the situation had played out, but apparently, Prince Rizel had taken a liking to me. To be quite honest, I didn't know why. Perhaps due to something like imprinting?

Maybe I'm the first woman to have ever cautioned him, and he's like a student looking up to his teacher? Even though I'm younger than him.

His face bright red, Prince Rizel had issued something resembling a profession of love within the office. "This may be so sudden that you might not believe me, but I adore your manner of speech and strong will. I would like to get to know you better. Is that a selfish thing for me to say?"

"Th-That's very flattering," I'd replied, attempting to dodge his advances with the utmost politeness. "But this is an important time in which you must choose your fiancée."

Unfortunately, my evasion had failed, and the prince had grown even more assertive. "That's why I would like to heed your words and get to know you better."

"Again, I'm flattered, but...please do the right thing for the sake of your people!"

He'd needed to know how foolish it would be to develop an interest in a girl from the countryside.

"I'm confident that if you chose me, we could make the people of this

kingdom happy,” the prince had said.

And where does that confidence come from? What’s the rationale here, exactly?

Sir McClain must have picked up on my desperation to politely dodge the issue. He’d interceded on my behalf. “You mustn’t cause women distress like this, Prince Rizel.”

“I see,” the prince had responded. “You find this bothersome, Lady Mary...?”

Stop looking at me with those doe eyes! I’m starting to understand how Grey must have felt, if just a little! Your face makes me want to protect you, and that’s completely and utterly unfair!

“You’re the first woman to ever accept me without greed blinding you,” the prince had continued. “Furthermore, how could I resist your allure when you speak with such honesty?”

Could any woman have stayed calm in the face of such an earnest proposal? Especially from such a gorgeous man. King Grey had never looked at Rosemary so passionately. Even in my current lifetime, I’d never experienced a bit of romance.

Still, you’re asking the impossible of me! I can’t get engaged to the prince, much less Grey and Tia’s child! That would be absurd!

Prince Rizel hadn’t been the least bit at fault, but I’d needed to put my foot down somewhere.

“I sincerely apologize...” I’d murmured.

“No, I’m the one who should apologize. However...” Prince Rizel had taken my hand and kissed my palm, much like a knight from a picture book. “At the very least, allow me to yearn for you, Mary.”

A thought had pierced through my hazy consciousness. *This prince could melt the heart of any woman.*



“I’ve never seen him like that before,” Sir McClain noted after the prince had left.

My mental state had deteriorated to the point where I could no longer work. Thus, Sir McClain had given me permission to rest, helping me sit on the couch and even brewing me tea.

“Thank you so much...” I managed to say.

My feeble response caused Sir McClain to laugh. “I’m just happy that you turned down the prince. I wouldn’t want to lose such a capable handmaid, after all.”

He’s happier about me staying on the job than resolving the fiancée uproar that’s plaguing the country?

Sir McClain’s kindness warmed my chest.

“You have no interest in being the crown prince’s fiancée?” he asked.

“Not at all,” I told him outright.

My past-life experiences had been more than enough. Yet, without those experiences, I might have been intrigued.

“Prince Rizel is a good man,” Sir McClain said. “And most women would find him handsome.”

“You’re right, but I won’t force myself into a situation I find unpleasant.”

That convinced Sir McClain. “I see. In that case, I’ll speak to the prince about this.”

That put a smile on my face. Having an ally like Sir McClain in a place as daunting as the royal palace made me truly happy.

“Thank you so much,” I said.

“Think nothing of it. Still, it would be regrettable if you remained a handmaid forever.”

When I raised my head, Sir McClain was looking at me with a sincere expression.

“Few women hold ideals that are so focused on our nation,” he continued. “It was certainly wonderful to hear your thoughts.”

As he stared at me directly, my face heated up. Sir McClain had transformed into a far more mature man than Rosemary remembered him being. In fact, it was difficult to think of the Albert from her memories as the same person. While looking at this maturely composed Sir McClain, a touch of loneliness blossomed within me. Rosemary had spent a long time with Albert, but we had lived an equal number of years apart. That time had changed him into a different person. Seeing my childhood friend transformed into a man twice my age caused mixed feelings of sadness and admiration. I didn’t know the correct way to respond.

“However, you should prepare yourself for the prince taking drastic measures,” Sir McClain warned, his gaze sharp.

I nodded. If Prince Rizel announced that he wanted me as his fiancée, I wouldn’t be able to refuse him, considering my position. Fortunately, the prince had agreed to respect my feelings, but what if someone who wanted to rush his marriage along found out about this? Regardless of my own wishes, that person could pressure my father, Baron Edigma, under royal decree. The thought gave me chills. Becoming the crown prince’s fiancée and diving back into that whirlpool of conspiracies didn’t strike me as the least bit amusing.

Overwhelmed, I spoke in a feeble voice. “Hopefully, we can convince the prince to give up somehow.”

Sensing my unease, Sir McClain gently patted me on the head. He’d grown so tall that I had to look up at him. “Don’t worry,” he said. “You needn’t force yourself to become anything you don’t want to be.”

The words of my childhood friend seemed directed at Rosemary as well as me. Overcome with the faint urge to cry, I jerked my head down.

“Thank you so much...” I mumbled.

Yes, thank you, Albert.

“Here’s an idea.” After removing his hand from my head, Sir McClain placed it on his hip. He then bent down to look at me at eye level. “Would you mind

consulting with an acquaintance of mine about this matter?"

"An acquaintance?" I repeated.

"I'm not much of an ideas man. There's someone else I trust with intellectual work."

An intelligent acquaintance? I wondered absentmindedly. *Who could that be? Did Sir McClain make a new friend in the past twenty years?*

"Are you familiar with Duke Reynaldo Rose?" he asked.

Upon hearing the name of my former younger brother, my mind went blank.

Chapter Two: The Ice Duke

KING Grey Dirésias feared two people. First was Tia Dirésias—his wife and the queen. The couple had met over twenty years ago when Count Danzes had recommended Tia to be Grey's handmaid.

As a beautiful young woman who retained her youthfulness, Tia's lovely red hair buoyantly swayed to and fro. When Tia brushed against Grey with her soft body, her mismatched youthfulness and bewitching beauty tantalized him. Despite already being engaged, Grey became infatuated with Tia. So much so that he would have done anything to be with her.

Rosemary Hubert, Grey's former fiancée, had constantly nagged him. Rather than showering him with sweet words, she'd done nothing but admonish him.

"A man destined to become king should not behave in such a manner," she would say. "You should be dedicating yourself to your studies."

She'd acted more like a tutor than a fiancée, and Grey grew irritated at her. What if those jade eyes set in such a beautiful face had pleaded for his love? What if she'd whispered sweet nothings into his ear? Perhaps things would have been different. However, Grey only ever remembered Rosemary lecturing him with a scowl.

Grey never visited Rosemary except when they appeared in public as a couple. Even when Rosemary moved into the palace, nothing changed. In fact, Grey spent far more time with Tia, who'd constantly served at his side as his handmaid.

Gradually, rumors spread about Grey and Tia's relationship. According to an informant, Rosemary, panicking about her unstable position, had threatened Tia. When Grey warned Rosemary not to lay a hand on Tia, she'd looked at him scornfully with those jade eyes.

This had only deepened Grey's revulsion towards her.

Rosemary's father had been unpleasant as well. For starters, Grey was irritated that someone else picked his fiancée during his childhood. He'd wanted to choose his bride for himself. At that time in his life, Grey had wanted a woman to see him as himself—not the future king—and plead for his love.

The reigning monarch had repeatedly warned and scolded Grey. Yet, the more his father disavowed his relationship with Tia, the more attached Grey became to her.

Around that time, a trembling Tia had come to Grey with startling news, tears flowing from her eyes.

"Lady Rosemary tried to kill me," she'd sobbed.

Grey was infuriated. Meanwhile, Count Danzes—Tia's father and Grey's advisor—had gathered evidence about his daughter's attempted murder. He recommended that Grey break off his engagement with Rosemary. The prince agreed readily, leaving everything else to Count Danzes.

The man did a splendid job. He even claimed to have found Rosemary's murder weapons: poisoned tea leaves and a dress stuck with poisoned needles. He'd also unearthed a number of Marquis Hubert's scandals, recommending that Grey condemn him as well.

Grey hadn't been able to wipe the grin off his face. Finally, he could purge the badgering marquis and his repugnant fiancée in one clean sweep. At the same time, he and his beloved Tia could proceed with their engagement.

Thus, Grey ordered his butler to write Rosemary a letter of summons. While this concluded the drama, the finale turned out bloodier than Grey ever imagined. He'd simply wanted to drive Rosemary away, but instead, she'd been executed.

I didn't know her crimes were that serious.

When Rosemary's charges had been decided, this single thought had crossed Grey's mind. Sure, seeing his lifelong fiancée being hung caused his chest to tighten. Even so, holding Tia in a close embrace had taken priority. The execution had frightened her into tears, after all.

Without Grey's knowledge, Count Danzes had even punished the Hubert

family and faction, both of whom had been proclaiming Rosemary's innocence.

What a truly dependable father-in-law, Grey had thought. By marrying Tia, I'll also gain a vassal who will give me peace of mind even after I become king.

That had filled him with pride.

Not long after Rosemary's execution, Grey and Tia enjoyed a spectacular wedding ceremony. That magnificent day had even been recorded as a picture book so that it would live on for future generations.

Upon reflection, the most enjoyable period of Grey's life probably ended there. As the new crown princess, Tia began spending exorbitant amounts of money, despite having shown no indication of such behavior during her time as a handmaid. New dresses and jewels had constantly been delivered to her room. Likewise, she'd stopped sharing a bed with Grey as soon as she'd fulfilled her duty of providing an heir.

Count Danzes then succeeded Marquis Hubert. His faction gained higher standing within the palace. As his followers began to dominate various executive positions, the neutral and opposing factions disappeared.

"Taking Tia as your future queen led to this upheaval," Grey's father had admonished him. "Do you not grasp the magnitude of this situation?"

Grey didn't understand what his father meant.

The country won't undergo any drastic changes just because executive positions have shifted, right? he'd thought. What's wrong with Count Danzes working in Marquis Hubert's stead? The kingdom is functioning without issue, right?

Seeing Grey's uncomprehending expression, the king hadn't been able to hide his disappointment. "If only Rosemary were still alive, things might have turned out for the better," he'd lamented.

These words had disgusted Grey.

Why would the villainess who tried to kill Tia be necessary?

Following Rosemary's condemnation, the king even cautioned those in the court.

“Isn’t this investigation proceeding with too much haste?” he’d asked. “Is the truth being covered up, perhaps?”

The king repeatedly advised those in a neutral position of authority to look into the truth of the matter. Yet now, Grey couldn’t even recall who’d been in charge of conducting the trial, as he’d entrusted everything to Count Danzes.

Based on Father’s statements, it must have been conducted neutrally, right?

In the end, Rosemary had been executed. When her hanging had been announced, the seriousness of her crimes had surprised Grey. Still, if her trial had uncovered the truth, how depraved of a criminal must she have been? Despite all this, Grey’s father always nurtured a soft spot for Rosemary. He’d treated her with more tenderness than he had his own son.

The mere memory still disgusted Grey.

Following the execution, no other obstacle impeded Tia and Grey. Yet, afterwards, Grey’s time flew by. One’s life could quickly spiral downward. After Tia gave birth to their first child, the couple stopped spending time together.

And due to a single letter, Grey had lost all desire to be with his wife.

One day, an envelope from an unknown sender appeared in his room. It indicated a certain time and place, promising to reveal the truth about Tia. While this information seemed dubious at best, Grey’s curiosity got the better of him. So he’d ventured to the designated spot with a small retinue of guards.

The location had been an entertainment district within the capital that nobles frequented. Though Grey himself hardly ever visited this location, he’d waited inside the specified room of a certain inn. A single note had been left for him there, instructing him to look outside the window and wait. Despite his vigilance, Grey hadn’t sensed the presence of an assassin, causing him to wonder if he’d been duped.

A while later, however, he spotted a familiar woman through the window of the opposite building.

It had been his wife.

Tia was talking to an unfamiliar man; the pair nuzzled their cheeks together

while embracing. Then they kissed.

The familiarity of their actions stunned Grey. The crown princess had been cheating on her own husband. Had she not understood the seriousness of these actions? Or had she been seeing other men since before their wedding?

In that case... In that case, am I not Rizel's true father?

Once this suspicion had bloomed within Grey, it grew without withering. Grey began entrusting Rizel to a wet nurse at all hours of the day, no longer finding the child cute. Eventually, he all but stopped visiting the boy.

In retaliation against his wife, Grey began visiting the entertainment district as well. *Publicly*. And he shoved his relationships with women in Tia's face. Later, he even took concubines, wanting to be confident in his future children's parentage. Alas, his concubines never showed any signs of pregnancy. Grey suspected Tia of plotting something, and in fact, his guards believed that she was drugging him somehow.

Grey didn't understand his wife.

Why did I fall in love with her in the first place? he wondered. *What in the world did I ever love about her?*

Unfortunately, he couldn't part from her, no matter how much he feared or despised her.

Grey feared one other person as well: a man named Reynaldo Rose. His fear took root when the nation's political system began to collapse. The people began to scorn the kingdom as Count Danzes' dictatorship. The former king had already abdicated, and Grey's vassals ridiculed him as a puppet king behind his back.

"Since you can't speak foreign languages, allow me to have meetings with other nations on your behalf," one retainer urged him.

"Since you have no knowledge of the tax system, allow me to handle those matters," another retainer persuaded him.

As a result of this cajolery, Grey indeed abandoned his duties and became a puppet king.

A certain man's gaze rebuked Grey for this. Recently, the younger brother of his former fiancée had appeared in the palace. The man's eyes—which were the same jade as Rosemary's—pierced him like arrows. Out of sheer terror, Grey longed to remove Reynaldo from the palace at any cost.

It felt like Rosemary herself was glaring at him. Rebuking him.

On the contrary, Reynaldo served the country well. While Marquis Hubert and Count Danzes opposed each other, Reynaldo possessed enough power to influence Danzes. He was even expanding the might of the neutral faction.

In Grey's estimation, Duke Reynaldo Rose was the greatest threat to the Dirésias Kingdom, not any neighboring countries. And so, Grey feared the man.

Quite honestly, he never felt secure.

Each time fear overcame Grey, he recalled Rosemary and her constant nagging. If he'd listened to her, would things have turned out differently? What if—rather than turning his gaze towards Tia—he'd dedicated himself to studying alongside Rosemary? Would her terrifying brother have become a loyal servant of his?

Grey didn't know. The King of Folly was indeed an apt title for him.

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I remember when Reynaldo first visited the Hubert region as a small child.

When Marquis Hubert brought home a child, Rosemary's quarrelsome mother began cursing at her husband more furiously than ever before. During this argument, Rosemary gripped the hand of the small, frightened child and snuck outside with him. The boy had stuck his fingers in his mouth, still unsteady on his feet.

Rosemary seated him on a bench inside her favorite garden. "Let's wait here until Father and Mother finish their conversation," she'd said.

Her parents argued often, and these fights always scared Rosemary to tears. While her much older brother constantly ignored her, the handmaids and servants had been most obedient to Marquis Hubert. As a result, no one had ever protected or shown concern for Rosemary.

Earlier, she'd overheard the start of the argument and peeked inside the room. There, a boy was standing a short distance away. Without thinking, she'd taken him outside.

How did he listen to them shouting at each other in the same room without crying? Rosemary had wondered. *Maybe it's because he's a boy?*

"How old are you?" Rosemary asked.

After thinking for a bit, the boy held up four fingers.

"I'm eight," Rosemary replied. "That means we're four years apart."

Can he not speak? she wondered, gazing into his eyes. They'd been the same jade green as hers.

"What's your name?" Rosemary asked.

If he can speak, he'll surely answer, she thought, waiting.

For a while, the boy stared at Rosemary. Eventually, however, he answered in a quiet voice. "Reynaldo."

Oh, he can speak. Thank goodness.

"I'm glad to meet you, Reynaldo. My name is Rosemary."

This was Rosemary's first memory of speaking to Reynaldo.

Reynaldo Hubert, I thought to myself in the present. *No, he's Duke Reynaldo Rose now.*

I reflected upon Rosemary's memories inside the room of an inn reserved for handmaids. When I strained, I vaguely recalled the memories and emotions of my past life. Just as I could sift through my own childhood memories, I could also reminisce about young Rosemary.

Reynaldo was the child of Marquis Hubert's mistress. After the woman married another man, she forced Reynaldo onto Marquis Hubert. Apparently, she'd called him a burden. Still, I couldn't be certain of this information, as Rosemary had overheard it from the gossipy maids.

Reynaldo never spoke a word about his real mother to Rosemary. After he'd lived in the Hubert region for a while, Rosemary had finally asked him about

her.

“Oh, I suppose I did have a mother,” he’d answered flatly.

As a result, Rosemary had been reluctant to ask him anything else.

Marquis Hubert had forbidden anyone to speak of Reynaldo around his wife. The mere mention of him put her in a foul mood, worsening her already weak constitution. Of course, bringing Reynaldo anywhere near Rosemary’s mother had been forbidden as well.

At the time, Rosemary’s only playmate had been Albert, who’d also been her servant. She’d always longed for someone else to play with when he was absent. Thus, when a new child arrived at the house, she was delighted, ignorant of her parents’ marital troubles. She’d so wanted a younger brother or sister.

Rosemary’s much older brother, who resembled their father, hadn’t shown any interest in her. Besides Albert, her only other playmates had been the maids, but maids wouldn’t participate in a child’s games with any real enthusiasm. Thus, Rosemary had vented all her stress on Reynaldo.

Consequently, this had been good for both of them. Reynaldo had been starved of affection. His needs had been met through contact with Rosemary. Likewise, Rosemary’s desire for more playmates had been fulfilled through her younger brother. Yet before long, other people teased Reynaldo for being too attached to his older sister. Upon learning this, Rosemary tried to distance herself from him out of sympathy.

I still can’t forget how heartbroken Reynaldo looked at the time.

“Elder sister...”

He’d called out to Rosemary in his still unbroken, high-pitched voice, his teary eyes wavering back and forth.

That weighed on my conscience so heavily.

Now, my formerly younger brother was an upstanding, thirty-two-year-old duke who presided over the northern region.

Still, I’m happy that he wasn’t implicated in Rosemary’s crimes.

I didn't know what had happened to Reynaldo in the twenty years since her execution. Had he found happiness? I was excited and scared to meet him. Rosemary had wished for nothing more than Reynaldo's happiness. She'd been afraid that after her death, her younger brother would take his own life, as he'd only ever shown love for her.

Upon regaining Rosemary's memories, I was relieved to learn of Reynaldo's survival. At the same time, I hadn't been able to shake off a sense of wrongness.

Reynaldo probably resents this country.

Though he'd insisted on Rosemary's innocence, the country hadn't taken him seriously. Ultimately, he'd been unable to stop her execution.

Also, he named his territory Rose. It's as though he's proclaiming his lingering attachment for everyone to hear.

If Reynaldo had truly sworn loyalty to the royal family, he wouldn't have named his lands after his criminal elder sister.

What happened in these last twenty years?

We'd been separated for so long that not even I could imagine what Reynaldo was thinking, despite Rosemary's memories. One other thing worried me as well. What if Reynaldo learned that Rosemary had been reincarnated?

I forced myself to stop thinking, not even wanting to entertain this idea.

After deciding on my day off, Sir McClain sent a letter to Duke Reynaldo for the three of us to meet. A few days later, the duke's response had arrived, and he began his journey to the capital.

Since meeting in the palace would draw suspicion, Sir McClain reserved a private room in his favorite cafeteria. I hadn't been outside the castle in a while, so walking down the lively streets made my heart race with excitement.

"Let me know if there's anything you want. I'll buy it for you," Sir McClain offered.

He looked dashing in his stylish civilian clothing, rather than his usual knightly uniform. I felt ridiculous just standing next to him.

"No, that won't be necessary!" I responded in a panic. "I'm being paid for my

work at the castle, after all.”

Similar to Reynaldo, I hadn’t seen Sir McClain in twenty years either. His casual offer to buy me something made this all the more obvious. The Albert from Rosemary’s memories hadn’t excelled at having natural conversations with women. The change saddened me a bit, but I continued to follow Sir McClain.

The inconspicuous cafeteria stood on the outskirts of town. Beautifully colored flowers decorated the single building, which was located on a quiet street corner. It didn’t resemble a cafeteria at all.

When Sir McClain opened the door, a bell rang, and a woman wearing a cute apron came out to greet us. “This way, please,” she said upon seeing Sir McClain, and led us to a private room.

So, he’s a regular customer.

Obediently, I followed the woman, who led us into a small side room. The interior had a tasteful, antique design with two comfortable chairs and a cozy sofa. I sat on one of the chairs, fidgeting nonstop as I looked around.

“Would you like anything to drink?” Sir McClain asked.

“Herbal tea, if it’s not too much trouble,” I replied.

“As you wish.”

After calling over the waitress in the apron, Sir McClain ordered for both of us. He smiled, friendly wrinkles appearing around the corners of his eyes.

“You needn’t be so nervous,” he said.

You’re asking way too much of me, I thought with a strained smile.

A while later, our drinks arrived. One sip of my fragrant herbal tea helped my palpitating heart to relax. Sir McClain drank his tea beside me, occasionally glancing in my direction. His beverage produced a citrus aroma.

At that moment, the door to our room opened soundlessly, and darkness subsumed my field of vision. The newcomer wore a black cloak and shirt. Likewise, trousers made from pitch-black fabric covered his long legs, and only the edges of his black boots were decorated with silver. This man’s sharp, jade

eyes were his only bright ornaments. Furthermore, he wore an icy expression that Rosemary had never seen before, which matched his inky black attire.

“Lady Edigma?” Sir McClain asked, looking at me with surprise. For some reason, he hurriedly offered me a handkerchief.

“Why is she crying, Albert?” the newcomer asked.

“I don’t know. After seeing you, she suddenly burst into tears.”

Wait, who’s crying?

As I squeezed my hand, a warm droplet fell onto my palm. So I *was* crying. Tears spilled unceasingly from my eyes.

“I’m sorry...” I apologized, looking down, unable to stop myself from sobbing.

Reynaldo’s pitch-black clothes represented a man still in mourning. Worse, his icy expression served as a cruel indication that he hadn’t found happiness. Rosemary’s soul wept inside me, screaming continuously within my mind.

Much to the distress of the two men in front of me, tears kept streaming down my face, showing no sign of stopping. This continued for a while, but eventually I calmed down. Apologetically, I took Sir McClain’s handkerchief and used it without reserve to finally wipe my sopping wet face. My eyes must have been bloodshot as well.

Once I’d calmed down, I tried coming up with an appropriate excuse for my behavior, but no good ideas occurred to me.

What reason would I have to cry after seeing the duke?! Could I claim that he looks like my estranged brother? No, my actual brother is working in the palace without a care in the world. They’ll figure out I’m lying right away. In that case, I could just say, “I suddenly remembered something sad that happened recently.” No, that’s questionable too. I’ve been holed up in the palace lately, and Sir McClain knows that nothing has happened. Looks like I only have one way out of this!

“I sincerely apologize, but I’m okay now,” I said.

“What in the world happened?” Sir McClain asked.

“Oh, you needn’t worry about me.” I smiled at Reynaldo and Sir McClain.

“Please, let’s continue with the conversation.”

Now that I’m in this mess, I have no choice but to play dumb! And don’t you dare interrogate a lady about why she started crying! That would be boorish!

I continued smiling at the two men, praying with all my heart that this bluff would work. Silence was the greatest defense.

Resigned, Sir McClain observed me for a moment, but eventually returned his gaze to Reynaldo. Speaking of Reynaldo, he was also watching me. He seemed nonplussed, despite having witnessed a woman breaking down in tears in front of him.

He was incredibly handsome.

His father, Marquis Hubert, had also been an attractive man in his youth, but Reynaldo possessed a different sort of masculine sensuality. He also radiated a dangerous aura that kept others at arm’s length. From what I could tell, he was as unsociable as ever.

“Let’s begin,” Reynaldo spoke in a pleasant tenor.

The voice I recalled from my past life had long since broken. I felt a twinge of sadness. Switching my emotional gears, I turned my gaze on Reynaldo and Sir McClain.

“So,” Reynaldo said, “is it true that Prince Rizel has fallen for you, and you’re unsure of how to deal with him?”

“That’s right,” I answered. “Based on what I’ve seen, the prince is serious.”

“Is anyone else aware of this?”

“No, we’ve been careful about the whole ordeal,” Albert said. “Since the prince himself is the most concerned about secrecy, he has—at the very least—distanced himself from her. It may only be a matter of time until word gets out, though.”

Indeed, Prince Rizel had shown himself to be a considerate man. Judging from his recent actions, he understood who would suffer the most distress and danger in this situation. Despite wanting to see me, he would only do so under the pretense of visiting Sir McClain rather than approach me in public. He’d

been acting so naturally that he'd even fooled me. *Oh, I must have been mistaken*, I'd begun to think, but when I let my guard down, he'd appeared in front of me with a surprise.

"I'm delighted to see you again today," he'd whispered, offering me a single begonia he'd hidden on his person.

If I wasn't mistaken, a red begonia was *a profession of love* in the language of flowers.

This blush-inducing experience occurred just a few days ago. While Prince Rizel's skilled flirtations—which called into question his lack of romantic experience—caused me to cringe in embarrassment, he didn't bat an eye. I had no idea how to respond.

Reynaldo scrutinized me with his sharp, unchanging gaze. "Hmm," he mused. "You have no interest in marrying His Highness, then?"

I shook my head. "No, I don't."

"If you meekly went along with his wishes, you would gain wealth, political power, and the love of a handsome prince. Even then, you have no interest in the prospect?"

"That's correct."

Reynaldo's eyes attempted to judge whether I was lying, causing me to remember my past life. Rosemary and Reynaldo hadn't shared similar facial features. However, their hair and eye colors were identical.

"From what I've heard, the land your father presides over—Edigma—isn't very wealthy," Reynaldo said.

I nodded. "Yes, you're exactly right about that."

"And accepting the prince's engagement would help your father in this regard. Have you not considered that?"

Oh, he's trying to rattle me.

Oftentimes, Marquis Hubert deliberately provoked those he was negotiating with as part of his evaluations.

But Reynaldo detested Marquis Hubert. To think he would do the same thing.

“My father has already retired,” I said. “He has no interest in politics or expanding his domain.”

“And what about your brother?” Reynaldo asked.

“My brother? He has no ambitions other than living in the capital.”

I answered Reynaldo honestly, seeing as I had nothing to feel guilty about. In response, Reynaldo furrowed his brow slightly, his handsome face twisting almost imperceptibly.

“Clearly, you’re not the sort of person to easily take the bait,” he said.

Reynaldo stood from his position in front of me, moving to sit beside me instead. Fear gripped me, for his eyes betrayed the sharpness of a predator, and he was tall enough that I had to look up at him.

“Reynaldo?” Sir McClain asked from beside us.

However, Reynaldo didn’t answer, grabbing my jaw between his thumb and forefinger. “Apparently, you don’t understand your own value.”

My voice trembled as I strained to speak, “I’m not sure what you mean by that...”

Despite how close we had been, memories of my kind younger brother’s smile grew hazy.

“You may be the only woman Prince Rizel would choose as his future queen,” Reynaldo continued. “As such, I presume you are wise, and I would like you to cooperate with us.”

“Cooperate?” I repeated.

Was the man in front of me truly Rosemary’s treasured younger brother? His shadowy eyes and faint smirk were so unlike the boy who’d smiled adoringly at his sister.

“With my help, you won’t have to become the prince’s fiancée,” Reynaldo said. “However, this won’t be an easy thing to accomplish. That’s why I’d like you to cooperate with me. If you agree to do so, you’ll be able to turn down the

prince's proposal, just as you wish."

I felt constricted, as if a snake had coiled itself around me. Simultaneously, sadness and anger consumed me.

No. This man is vastly different from the Reynaldo that Rosemary once knew. The little brother that she so loved would never say these things.

I saw Rosemary crying in my mind, her anger and sadness also washed over me. I couldn't allow this. Yes, this man might have been Rosemary's treasured younger brother, but I couldn't allow him to hurt her. I couldn't tolerate anyone degrading Rosemary's beloved Reynaldo. Not even Reynaldo himself.

I slapped away Reynaldo's hand with all my might.

"That's quite enough, Reynaldo!" I shouted, my anger pouring forth. Allowing momentum to carry me, I stood up, looking down at his dumbfounded expression. "You're acting just like Father, despite saying you never wanted to turn out like him!"

Indeed, Reynaldo hated Marquis Hubert.

"Father treats you as nothing more than a tool," he'd once said to Rosemary. "I never want to end up like him."

Yet now, he was viewing me—Mary—as a mere tool.

How many years had passed since I'd scolded Reynaldo like this? Whenever someone mocked him for being the son of a concubine, he'd never been a bit upset. No, whenever Reynaldo had been moved to anger, it had always concerned Rosemary.

Sometimes, nobles mocked Rosemary for being a dull woman whose fiancé had no interest in her. Other times, women who'd coveted the prince harassed her behind her back. Reynaldo found ways to secretly punish these people. It had always pained Rosemary when her younger brother exacted revenge on her behalf. In short, Reynaldo lost his perspective on matters concerning Rosemary. In response, I—or, rather, she—had always scolded him.

"Don't give up on your own happiness," Rosemary had told him. "Don't lose sight of yourself."

Even now, those feelings hadn't changed.

Wait, even now...?

"Ah," I mumbled.

When I returned to my senses, Reynaldo was staring up at me with wide eyes.

Oh, he looks the same as he did all those years ago, I thought rather stupidly.

"Rosemary...?" Reynaldo asked.

As that single word left his lips, I finally understood the gravity of the situation.

* * *

"ROSEMARY, introduce yourself to His Highness," her father instructed.

"My name is Rosemary Hubert. It's an honor to meet you."

Rosemary curtsied as she spoke, as she'd been taught to do numerous times. Meanwhile, a boy who was slightly taller than her examined Rosemary with disinterest.

"I will continue devoting myself to my studies," Rosemary continued. "In doing so, I hope to support you as your fiancée, my prince."

"Thank you, little princess," the king replied. "I hope you support my son well."

"Of course."

Though Rosemary found Prince Grey's brusqueness difficult to handle, she liked his father, for the king showered her with love that her own father didn't.

Rosemary's fiancé had been decided upon soon after her birth. However, she first met him at the age of eight. Until then, most of her memories involved being taught manners. Not only had she learned to write at an early age, but she'd also studied foreign languages.

Between these lessons, she spent her time playing with Albert and Reynaldo. While Albert had been raised alongside Rosemary, Reynaldo joined her family later. Since Rosemary had few opportunities to play, these were the only times she felt at peace.

Rosemary's mother had been sickly ever since giving birth to her. After learning of Reynaldo, her condition further deteriorated. Consequently, Rosemary only saw her mother when saying goodnight. The rest of her time was devoted to receiving a queenly education.

Due to her frail nature, Rosemary's mother couldn't endure her husband withholding affection and taking mistresses. Most of all, she'd never grown accustomed to acting as the marquis' wife. This had often led to her prostrating herself in apology.

Oftentimes, Rosemary's father brought her much older brother to social events instead of his wife, for she'd been too weak of mind and body. Rumors about Marquis Hubert and his absent wife spread around these gatherings in the blink of an eye. As a result, many women sought the marquis' affection, which led to him taking mistresses.

When Rosemary learned that her father had sired another child, she wasn't even surprised. She'd heard rumors from other children, who'd learned them from their parents. No matter how ignorant Rosemary might have been, she'd at least been aware that others were mocking her family.

Shortly after Reynaldo joined the family, Rosemary's mother died. Rosemary quietly watched her mother pass on into the afterlife at an inconspicuous funeral. Since Reynaldo stood at a distance out of respect for the woman, Rosemary called him over and embraced him.

"Don't cry, Rosemary," Reynaldo said.

Tears poured from her eyes. Protecting her younger brother should still have been her duty, but he was the one comforting her. Even if Rosemary had few memories of her mother, she'd still been an important figure in her life.

Honestly, Rosemary had never wanted to become the prince's fiancée. She hated studying and memorizing boring courtly etiquette. Rather, Rosemary longed for the family memories that everyone else seemed to take for granted.

If I'm ever reborn, I hope to be a normal girl in my next life.

Huddled on the cold floor of a prison cell, this absentminded thought crossed Rosemary's mind. She'd grown weary of her duties as a fiancée and of being her

father's pawn.

Would I have been happy with a normal amount of wealth and status?

Throughout her childhood, Rosemary often saw parents and children walking hand-in-hand around town. This sight had always created an intense longing in her.

In my next life, I want to hold my mother's or father's hands. I want them to pat my head.

Despite being less than devout, she asked God for this small favor.

At the same time, she longed for a mutually loving relationship. Since she'd only ever been engaged to Prince Grey, she'd never experienced actual romance. Political marriages were normal, after all. Ordinary romances and marrying your soulmate belonged to the world of picture books. Marriages based on true love were rare. Even so, Rosemary wanted to build a family that cared for one another, along with her husband. In this respect, she was envious of Prince Grey and Tia, whose love had come to fruition.

No man had ever tried to court Rosemary. Not because she lacked charm, but due to her position as the crown prince's fiancée, no man had been able to convey his feelings to her. Alas, she had no way of knowing this.

Rosemary simply wanted to love and be loved in equal measure.

In the end, she'd been reborn into the circumstances she'd wished for. The family she'd so desired had become a reality. In this second life, would an ordinary romance and family worthy of a picture book be within her reach?

It was a question for another time.

* * *

"ARE you Rosemary?" Reynaldo asked.

"No, I'm not," I replied.

Rosemary was reminded of the foreign language practice sentences she studied as a girl. *I couldn't admit that, so I denied the truth, as I'd originally intended to do.*

Being unable to control your emotions could have dire consequences. I'd learned this lesson after bursting into tears in front of Reynaldo and Sir McClain. Yet at the same time, I'd also learned how to deal with such situations.

"Then might I ask how you knew of Reynaldo's father?" Sir McClain asked me, his eyes desperate. He adopted a more respectful tone, as if convinced of my identity.

"You misheard things," I said. "Also, please stop speaking to me so formally, Sir McClain."

"How could I not show my reverence when you might be Rosemary?!"

Earlier, I'd noted how much Sir McClain had matured. Yet now, as my former knight interrogated me, I saw traces of his youthfulness from those bygone days. Whenever Rosemary acted recklessly, Sir McClain often ignored her position and scolded her like this.

But now's not the time for nostalgia.

"To my knowledge, Lady Rosemary is the deceased elder sister of Duke Rose," I said.

"That's right," Sir McClain answered. "Yet even so!"

"Please consider the situation. I'm the daughter of Baron Edigma, and I've lived in Edigma since my birth. My father and brother know this to be the truth as well!"

I couldn't have sounded more reasonable. Even if reincarnation could serve as a plausible explanation, no one would dare say it aloud. Sir McClain appeared to be thinking the same thing. Nevertheless, he was racking his brain for some means to derive his desired answer. Conversely, Reynaldo—who I could see from the corner of my eye—remained in silent contemplation. I might have been able to fool Sir McClain, but I worried about my ability to deceive Rosemary's clever younger brother. In that case, I would have to make the first move.

"Truthfully, I was on the verge of losing consciousness while speaking to Duke Reynaldo a little while ago," I lied. "I don't remember what I said clearly." I folded my hands together and smiled, as if pleading with the two men. "This

might sound unbelievable, but perhaps Rosemary possessed me in order to speak with both of you.”

“That’s ridiculous...” Sir McClain mumbled.

Yes, I’d spouted nonsense, but in my defense, they wouldn’t believe me if I didn’t weave in a small amount of truth. As such, I’d formulated this crude excuse.

“But it’s the truth,” I insisted, placing a finger to my mouth and looking down. “I’m not sure what compelled me to say those things myself.”

I’d spoken words that only a dead person could have uttered. In order to sell Sir McClain and Reynaldo on my lie, I would have to insist that Rosemary’s spirit had possessed me. However, Reynaldo—who’d remained silent up until now—burst into laughter, his mirth seeming to mock my absurd plan.

“You certainly are quite the surprise, Lady Mary,” he said. “Don’t think you can deceive me with this talk of possession. You’re the reincarnation of Rosemary, aren’t you?”

Reynaldo brazenly put into words what Sir McClain hadn’t been able to utter.

“What are you saying?” I asked. “I couldn’t possibly be...”

After being called out on my lie, I tried to feign composure, but my face had more than likely started twitching.

“I don’t say this on a whim,” Reynaldo continued. “Rosemary wouldn’t know about this, but after her death, I put something to the test.”

Reynaldo withdrew something from his pocket and showed it to me. The item was a necklace with a small burlap sack attached to it. The sack had an unfamiliar seal embroidered on it.

Could that be some sort of enchantment?

“This sack contains hair from Rosemary’s remains,” Reynaldo explained. “Following her execution, I couldn’t accept her death. And so, I visited a magus.”

“A magus?” I repeated with vague apprehension.

Reynaldo stroked the burlap sack nostalgically. Based on that loving caress, I had no doubts—the pouch did in fact contain Rosemary’s hair.

“I never expected anything to come of my meeting with the magus,” Reynaldo said. “But at the same time, it was worth trying.”

Sir McClain turned towards Reynaldo. “What in the world did this magus do?” Apparently he didn’t know about this either.

I placed a hand on my chest in a desperate attempt to slow my rapid heartbeat.

“I asked the magus to retrieve Rosemary’s soul and reincarnate her,” Reynaldo answered.

Wait, he requested my reincarnation? From a magus?

The Magi—a secret organization that never appeared in public—were a group that divined our nation’s future and looming calamities. While this sounded dubious, the magi had predicted past disasters that might have befallen our kingdom, reducing harm to its bare minimum. Thus, a portion of the nobility had been told of their existence. As the fiancée of royalty, Rosemary had also been privy to this knowledge.

I didn’t know what the magi were capable of, but if they could predict the future, perhaps they could reincarnate someone as well.

“E-Even so, why were *you* able to request the help of a magus, Reynaldo?!” I cried out.

Normally, the magi only worked for the royal family. One of their number reincarnating a condemned criminal at the request of a marquis’ son was unthinkable.

Yes, it’s unheard of, but... Oh no, what did I just say?

As soon as I jerked my head up, Reynaldo—wearing the sweetest of smiles—embraced me. Since he wore nothing but black, his embrace felt as though darkness were swallowing me whole.

“Thank you for falling into my trap, Rosemary,” he said. “I love you. How I’ve longed to see you for all these years.”

Overjoyed, he whispered sweet words into my ear, but I heard none of them. I'd fallen into a grave of my own making. Since Sir McClain still hadn't grasped the situation, Reynaldo clarified, refusing to let go of me all the while.

"A baron's daughter should have no way of knowing about a national secret like the magi," he said. "Albert, even you only learned of them recently, correct?"

"That's right," Albert confirmed. "I was told of them after becoming the high commander."

"Exactly. Yet when I spoke of the highly classified magi, Lady Mary wasn't skeptical of their existence. The only women who should know of the magi are the queen, a fiancée of someone in the royal family, and perhaps a magus herself."

After realizing that I'd been set up, I said nothing, allowing Reynaldo to embrace me.

"Allow me to have a better look at your face, Rosemary," Reynaldo said. "To think I'm able to embrace you again. Now that I've observed you more closely, the strength in your gaze when you stare into my eyes is exactly like Rosemary's. Forgive me for speaking so rudely when I didn't know your identity. I sincerely apologize."

Reynaldo's face grazed mine as he stared at me, his tone enrapt.

The knight who'd once sworn loyalty to Rosemary approached me, kneeling before me once again. "Is that truly you, Lady Rosemary...?" Sir McClain asked in a trembling voice.

Unable to keep up the charade any longer, I resigned myself and answered affirmatively. "Yes, it's me."

Speaking of which, he never answered my question...

"Did you truly ask a magus to reincarnate Rosemary?" Sir McClain asked.

In response to his question, Reynaldo remained silent, his smile betraying a hint of darkness.



REYNALDO Hubert's life had completely changed. The death of his sister cast the world into darkness. His court rank had been demoted, and a portion of the Hubert lands had been returned to the state. After their father had been exiled to a foreign country, Reynaldo's older brother had succeeded him to preside over the shrunken Hubert region.

Reynaldo lived in hiding, eking out a paltry existence in the Hubert region. There, he considered how to avenge his sister. First, he needed money. Before her imprisonment, Rosemary gave Reynaldo all her assets, which he used without hesitation.

Even after her death, Rosemary cared for him. Whenever he mourned her, sheer agony ripped his heart in two.

Nevertheless, Reynaldo used Rosemary's assets gratefully, focusing on investing. By using his older brother's name, Reynaldo helped other nobles on the verge of bankruptcy acquire more funds. As a result, Reynaldo enriched himself, earning back his investments several times.

Next, he needed status, but this in particular would prove difficult to acquire. Seeing as the Hubert name had been so thoroughly tarnished, he wouldn't be able to reuse it. In that case, he had no choice but to acquire a new name. For many years, Reynaldo bided his time at the bottom of the societal hierarchy, unable to display his true abilities. Since no one would trust someone as young as Reynaldo, he used the connections established through his fundraising to expand his reach into a neighboring country.

When Reynaldo finally became a young man himself, he turned his attention towards the small tribes terrorizing the country, fanning the flames of conflict. Everything went according to plan. After resolving this conflict, he gained a duchy in honor of his great achievement. The court also presented Reynaldo with the northern territory, which had been obtained by defeating the small tribes.

When asked to give this territory a name, Reynaldo immediately decided upon Rose. Speaking his sister's name filled him with joy. He finally felt able to breathe, as if his sister were watching over him.

After gaining status, Reynaldo needed to dominate politics next. Count

Danzes had acquired a microcosm of political authority. Through the use of money and connections, Reynaldo disrupted the balance of this microcosm. Essentially, he imitated what Count Danzes had done to Marquis Hubert.

Eventually, Reynaldo exposed Count Danzes' embezzlements, which the man had covered up for years. Resigned to his fate, the count disappeared after being driven out of the castle. In a sense, this was Reynaldo's first act of vengeance. He would punish everyone involved in Rosemary's death, and Count Danzes was no exception. Nevertheless, the count—being a clever man—had disappeared from the capital before Reynaldo could add more crimes to his charges.

Reynaldo didn't want status for the same reasons as Count Danzes. Similarly, his revenge hadn't ended just because the count had been exiled. Disrupting the royal political structure was just a byproduct of his vengeance. Seizing control of the monarchy, which had become as fragile as a dead tree, would have been incredibly easy, but that wouldn't qualify as revenge.

Along with money and status, Reynaldo mobilized the hearts of his followers and ordered Albert to win over Prince Rizel. At the same time, Reynaldo helped tear King Grey and Queen Tia apart. Yet even without his interference, that would have only been a matter of time.

Watching the people who'd framed Rosemary fall so far delighted Reynaldo. He couldn't allow them to be happy. In fact, he would rather they suffered for all eternity. Thus, Reynaldo turned his melancholy upon the royal family. He glared at the king and queen without any intention of disguising his feelings. For this reason, King Grey and his faction were terrified of Reynaldo.

They should have feared him *more*.

When you see these jade eyes—identical to Rosemary's—gazing upon your misery, imagine that my older sister is the one looking at you.

Reynaldo's vengeance would continue at any cost. Next, he needed to proceed with Prince Rizel's engagement. First, Reynaldo planned to wed the prince to a handmaid, mirroring Grey and Tia's matrimony. Once all the pieces were in place, he would see Prince Rizel hanged in a twist of irony.

In the end, this plan was shattered. However, because Rosemary was at fault

for that, he would gladly abandon this strategy. The flame burning within Reynaldo didn't burn out. Instead, it smoldered within the depths of his heart.

Yes, a faint light of hope had sparked to life inside Reynaldo's chest, but he could no longer extinguish the flames of vengeance. His entire being subsisted on revenge.

* * *

"**GOOD** morning, Mary," Sir McClain greeted me.

"Yes, good morning, Sir Albert," I responded.

So, why in the world would the boss of a handmaid bow reverently to his servant when she showed up to work? My life had taken a drastic turn. Reynaldo and Albert exposed me as Rosemary's reincarnation, simultaneously discovering that I possessed her memories. Afterwards, the ruthless duke had treated me tenderly, and the trustworthy high commander had knelt before me—his subordinate.

"Allow me to swear loyalty to you once again, my liege," Sir McClain had said.

Compared to when Rosemary had forced him to *play knight* as a child, the high commander was far more dashing now. I hadn't been able to stop the blush from creeping up my cheeks.

"Please, Sir McClain, don't treat me any differently than you have up 'til now!" I'd shouted.

"I would prefer you didn't call me McClain. Refer to me as Albert, as you once did."

As a result, Albert—who I'd just gotten used to calling *Sir McClain*—treated me in a completely different manner from before. That being said, our boss-subordinate relationship hadn't changed. The past was the past, and in this life, I was merely a handmaid. I'd explained this to Reynaldo and Albert repeatedly, and while both of them hadn't seemed the least bit convinced, I'd succeeded in making them comply for now.

"Rosemary—no, Lady Mary," Reynaldo had said. "Please don't let the joy of our reunion end here. Let's meet with each other again soon."

He might as well have said *I won't let you escape*. Was I mistaken to have interpreted this as a threat?

Reluctantly, I'd promised to meet with Reynaldo at the same place on my next day off. Yet, with closing time approaching, we'd left the cafeteria.

The next day, Albert's conduct had changed so thoroughly that Nicky grilled me on the matter.

"Hey, what in the world is going on?" she asked. "Did something happen on your day off?"

Rather than being happy about my newfound closeness with Albert, she appeared to be taking in a dreadful sight when looking at me. When Nicky first heard about Albert and me going out on my day off, she was delighted to ask me about it, but then Albert himself showed up.

"Good morning," he'd greeted me with an enrapt smile. "So, what happened yesterday wasn't a dream."

I'd chastised him for saying something so suggestive. Afterwards, he'd apologized like a scolded puppy, regretfully heading towards his office with his tail tucked between his legs. Nicky interrogated me after that. Naturally, I had no choice but to dodge her questions, thinking all the while about how I would need to lecture Albert later.

As usual, I prepared tea for the knight, who—despite having once been my childhood friend and servant—had grown much older than me. I then knocked on his door. Until now, I'd waited for him to invite me inside, but this time, I heard the door opening from his side.

"I thought you would be here soon," Albert said.

Was my boss really coming out to meet me?

"Pardon me," I replied, suppressing my agitation as I entered the room. I thrust a cup of Albert's favorite citrus tea into his hand. "Please have some self-awareness. I'm not Rosemary anymore, and right now, *you're* my boss!"

At first, a reluctant Albert had argued, "I can't allow my liege to brew me tea." Yet in the end, I'd convinced him to let me work as a handmaid, reminding him

at length of our current positions. Just as I was doing now.

“Yes, I know that you’re my handmaid,” Albert responded with a dopey grin.

“In that case, don’t open the door for me or call me *my liege* like you did this morning.”

“That won’t be possible. I swore my allegiance to you, after all.”

When are you going to stop contradicting yourself?

Fed up, I ignored Albert and prepared a teapot with refills. When Rosemary had been alive, Albert had been a novice knight. At the time, Rosemary was the future queen, and as such, Albert planned to become her personal guard. First, he’d needed to display enough ability to be entrusted with a unit, however.

At this time in their young lives, Albert and Rosemary only saw each other at the palace occasionally. Yet each time, Albert always swore his unwavering loyalty to her.

“I strive to be of service to you each day,” he’d said. “I have nothing to offer other than my swordsmanship.”

Over the years, Albert’s face had grown more masculine, and Rosemary had been proud of his knightly transformation. She’d also wanted to become a queen who made him proud, but in the end, she’d died without having fulfilled this dream.

“My liege,” Albert said.

When I glared at him, he cleared his throat.

“So, when did you regain memories of your past life, Lady Mary?” he asked.

“About half a year ago. But throughout my life, I understood things that I shouldn’t have been able to. I didn’t realize this knowledge came from Rosemary’s memories until recently.”

The trigger had been a rope grazing my neck accidentally. I could never tell Reynaldo or Albert about this, as it would break their hearts.

“I’m glad you regained your memories,” Albert said. “We can see each other again now.”

I felt embarrassed when he placed his hand on his chest and smiled joyfully, so I averted my gaze.

“Even so, I’m not Rosemary herself,” I said. “I’m Mary.”

“I understand. Likewise, I’m not the Albert you once knew. We’re in a similar position.”

Certainly, Albert hadn’t been such a smooth talker during Rosemary’s lifetime. Back then, he was a clumsy boy with a passion for swordsmanship. Now past the age of thirty-five, Albert had become a completely different person.

“Unfortunately, I’ve grown quite a bit older, but if you would excuse my boasting, I’m much more skilled than I was back then,” Albert said. “Rest assured that I will protect you.”

Uh, protect me from what, exactly?

“You’re too high-ranking to protect a mere baron’s daughter serving as a handmaid,” I pointed out.

“This has nothing to do with position.” Albert scooped up my hand and swore a knight’s oath, just like when we’d played pretend. He kissed my palm. The faint warmth of his lips lingered on my skin. “My loyalty still lies with you.”

Albert’s behavior had long since crossed the line of acceptability. I could barely even do my job.

“Speaking of which, I haven’t seen His Highness lately,” I said.

A few days had passed since I’d been outed as Rosemary. Tomorrow was my next day off. Without fail, Prince Rizel always visited at least once between my days off, but he hadn’t this time. Though I’d originally met with Reynaldo to discuss how to deal with the prince, we still hadn’t come up with a solution.

“You needn’t worry about him,” Albert said, his smile a stark contrast to his usually blank expression. “Reynaldo and I are taking the proper measures. You have nothing to be concerned about.”

When did this happen?

Albert’s words provided me with nothing but a sense of foreboding. However,

my knight merely smiled, declining to provide any further explanation. Upon seeing this uncanny version of my former childhood friend, I resigned myself to whatever the future held.



TOBIAS Edigma learned about the birth of his first daughter, Mary Edigma, while inspecting his region. After hearing that his wife had gone into labor before noon and given birth to an adorable baby girl, Tobias raced back to his manor. Since his beloved wife had struggled when giving birth to Stanley, Tobias had been told to expect a long delivery with this child as well. This sudden turn of events had surprised Tobias, but nonetheless, he spurred his horse onward, his chest swelling with elation.

It was early spring. As Tobias raced through a field on his way home, a gust of wind assaulted him, forcing him to close his eyes. He cracked his eyes open when something grazed his cheek, only to find a large number of marigolds blooming all around him. The gust had scattered their petals into the air, some of them sticking to Tobias.

It was as if the flowers were celebrating his daughter's birth. Upon returning to the manor, Tobias named the soundly sleeping baby *Mary* after those flowers.

Mary turned out to be incredibly intelligent, even though she couldn't receive a lady's education in such a remote region. In fact, her life resembled that of a common village girl's. Regardless, she still politely curtsied to their occasional guests. She would welcome visitors with courteous words that Tobias had no memory of her ever learning. In response, guests often praised Tobias for having such a wonderful daughter.

"Where did you learn these manners, Mary?" Tobias asked while holding his young daughter's hand.

Mary looked up at him curiously. "I didn't learn them. I just know them."

The way his young daughter casually used ladylike etiquette—which took girls years to learn—puzzled Tobias.

"You're a clever girl, aren't you?" he asked.

However, because Tobias's wife always affirmed Mary no matter the circumstances, he didn't press the matter. If Mary had been born with these abilities, it was the duty of her parents to love her and accept these gifts as part of her individuality. Honestly, Tobias wouldn't have minded if Mary started teaching manners to her freewheeling older brother.

Without a doubt, Tobias loved his family.

Unfortunately, his beloved wife passed away too soon. Years earlier, they'd gotten married following a passionate romance, despite her chronic illness. His wife had been warned that pregnancy would be difficult for her. Nevertheless, she'd wanted children, and they'd been blessed with both a son and a daughter.

"Thank you for giving me such a happy life, Tobias," his wife said to him at the time of her death. "I love you, Stanley. Father and Mary are in your hands now. Try not to cause them too much trouble, will you?"

Despite his usually brusque manner, tears welled up in Stanley's eyes. "I won't."

"Mary, my darling little girl," she continued. "I'm sorry we couldn't be together longer, but I'll always be by your side."

The small girl squeezed her mother's hand silently. Afterwards, Tobias stayed with his family until the last embers of his beloved's life burned out.

Tobias and his children decorated his wife's grave with large flowers each year on the anniversary of her death. Tobias had buried her coffin in a scenic location, as befitted someone who loved flowers and nature. Eventually, when Stanley stopped accompanying them, Tobias and Mary decorated the grave and prayed by themselves.

Even after all these years, Tobias still loved his wife, yet in the midst of his busy life, his sadness was fading away. One day, he overheard Mary mutter something.

"I hope Mother is my next mom as well."

"What an interesting idea," Tobias replied.

If we could all be family again in the next life, how wonderful would that be?

he thought. *If I'm reborn, I'd like to be with my wife again.*

Her next words rendered him speechless.

"I mean, my last mother didn't pay any attention to me."

Her last mother?

"Mary..." Tobias said, feigning composure. "What do you mean by your *last mother*?"

However, Mary appeared to not understand what she'd just said. "I don't know," she answered with a smile.

Not only did Mary know etiquette that she'd never learned, but she'd also spoken of a previous mother. Tobias had a vague sense of what this meant. But what did that matter? If Mary had been born with these memories, it was Tobias' fatherly duty to love her and accept them as part of her.

You think so too, don't you?

Tobias spoke to his wife from within his heart as she slept beneath her grave. If his assumptions turned out to be true, he might be able to see his wife again someday.

What a wonderful dream to have!

* * *

IT was my day off. In other words, I would be meeting with Reynaldo and Albert. It would stir up rumors if too many people saw me, so Albert told me to hide and wait in the high commander's training grounds while he brought a horse around. I had too much time on my hands, so I kicked pebbles with the toes of my shoes.

The sound of hooves approached in the distance. Thinking Albert had arrived, I lifted my head, but what I found confused me. The high commander hadn't appeared on horseback as I'd expected him to. Instead, a carriage had parked in front of me.

"Lady Mary."

At the same time, Albert—who'd also arrived on horseback—dismounted in

front of me.

“Why the carriage?” I asked.

“It’s Duke Reynaldo’s vehicle,” Albert replied, more than a little displeased. “Apparently, he couldn’t wait until the original meeting time.”

The coachman disembarked from the parked carriage. He glanced at me, bowed his head deeply, and held out his hand. Unsure of what to do, I looked up at Albert, who still stood beside me. After roughly mussing his own hair, the high commander nodded.

“This is the coachman Duke Reynaldo employs when he desires secrecy,” Albert explained. “It shouldn’t be a problem.”

Relieved, I held out my hand to the coachman. However, Albert grabbed my hand and placed it on his elbow. He meant to escort me.

A curtain blocked the carriage entrance. When it opened, someone held out their hand, and Duke Reynaldo’s smile—more radiant than the sun—greeted me. “Good morning, Mary. I was looking forward to seeing you again.”

I climbed aboard the carriage, inwardly reprimanding myself for already feeling exhausted. I sat opposite Reynaldo and huddled into a ball. Meanwhile, Albert rode in front of the carriage on the horse he’d brought. In addition to the carriage having no engravings or any other identifiers, its windows were all closed and curtained. Certainly, this seemed to be a vehicle designed for secrecy.

“Do you find the life of a handmaid inconvenient, Mary?” Reynaldo asked.

“No, it suits me very well.”

“Is that so? I’m relieved to hear it.”

At first, both men wanted to address me as Rosemary and treat me as a superior. I’d refused, making them swear to call me Mary and treat me as a handmaid. Immediately, Reynaldo began referring to me as Mary. Nevertheless, he’d also requested my permission to treat me as his older sister when not in public. I reluctantly allowed this since we wouldn’t have many opportunities to meet in private.

The carriage trundled down an unpaved road. Compared to the beautiful boy from Rosemary's memories, the Reynaldo sitting in front of me was a completely different adult man. He hadn't earned the title of Ice Duke simply due to his abilities, for this moniker also referred to his cold, almond eyes. Indeed, his unadorned, impassive visage was so beautiful that it might have been carved from ice.

During my life as Rosemary, Reynaldo and I had been such a beautiful pair of siblings that we'd looked natural next to each other. Now, I felt out of place.

While my current father had a boyish face, my mother had been beautiful. Stanley and I didn't look like either of them in particular. As a result, I wasn't beautiful, but I wasn't exactly cute either. Even so, Reynaldo and I were both tall and slender. In my current life, body type was the only similarity we shared.

Reynaldo crossed his long legs, leaned slightly forward, and stared at me calmly. Unsure what to make of his gaze, I looked out the window, but it wasn't even open.

"What kind of childhood did you have?" Reynaldo asked.

During our first reunion, he asked me many questions about myself.

"The Edigma region isn't prosperous enough to allow for luxury," I said. "I knitted, worked in the field, and took care of the livestock."

"That must have been difficult."

I shook my head. "Not at all. I enjoyed my upbringing."

Rosemary could never have imagined such a life, but I found my upbringing truly fulfilling. A great number of things existed that you could never understand from books or other written accounts. The joy of harvesting crops grown with one's own two hands. Living alongside animals. Gratitude for knowing tomorrow would be just as peaceful as today. The precious act of transforming the life you'd nurtured into your own life.

"My life was very fulfilling," I said. "I enjoyed every day."

"That's wonderful to hear," Reynaldo answered.

Though he wore a genuine smile, his expression didn't make me the slightest

bit happy. While I'd been enjoying my life as Mary, Reynaldo and Albert had been mourning Rosemary.

"Reynaldo," I said, speaking to him as his former older sister.

The smile disappeared from his jade eyes. Presumably, he'd understood my thoughts.

"I've wanted to tell you this for a long time," I continued, placing my heartfelt thoughts into each and every word. "I don't want vengeance against King Grey or Queen Tia. So please, if you're thinking about revenge, I'd like you to stop."

I didn't want my precious little brother drenched in blood and tainted by evil. If Rosemary's death had caused his thirst for vengeance, it was my duty as her reincarnation to stop him.

Reynaldo sensed how serious I was and closed the distance between us, squeezing my hands. "I fully understand how you feel, Rosemary." He nuzzled his cheek against my hand. "After all, you're my kind elder sister, whose heart aches for me. I would never do anything to make you sad."

"You promise?" I asked.

"I promise."

I gazed into Reynaldo's eyes. He returned my gaze head-on, his eyes unwavering.

"Thank you..." I mumbled.

This finally put an end to my worries.

After entering a private room of the cafeteria we'd visited a few days earlier, the three of us sat down at a round table. I ordered milk tea, Reynaldo ordered coffee, and Albert ordered citrus tea. The waitress looked at us suspiciously while leaving the room.

I can't blame her. Two gorgeous men in their thirties and a country girl? We make for an odd group.

Regardless, the two men stared at me, their smiles lacking any trace of concern.

“How long has it been since the three of us had tea and coffee together?” I asked.

“It was before Rosemary started living in the palace, so around twenty-four years, perhaps?” Reynaldo replied.



Twenty-four years. The heavy passage of time weighed on me.

“That’s right,” I said. “If I had lived, I’d be thirty-six years old. The same as Albert.”

How shocking. It wouldn’t be strange for me to have three children at that age. Oh, and speaking of children...

“Are either of you married?” I asked.

Both men stopped drinking, but Albert placed his teacup on its saucer first. “Funny you should ask. I’ve been so busy that I haven’t given any thought to marriage.”

“I haven’t either,” Reynaldo agreed. “The Rose region still isn’t stable enough for me to wed.”

I nodded. “Oh, I see.”

What a shame, I thought. Rumors of Reynaldo and Albert had reached my ears in Edigma even before I’d started working as a handmaid. Due to their good looks and high status, many women sought to become their wives. Even country noblewomen would flood the banquets they attended. Likewise, women clawed tooth and nail for invitations to the high-society parties they were present for. As the provincial daughter of a baron, I’d never been to the sort of parties they attended.

“Personally, I’m curious to know about *your* marriage status,” Reynaldo said.

“Me too,” Albert agreed. “Since you’re one of the crown prince’s fiancée candidates, would I be correct in assuming you’re unmarried?”

I nodded meekly in response to their brimming curiosity. “Honestly, I’m as single as a young lady can be.”

“Is there anyone you’re interested in?” Reynaldo pressed.

Wow, they’re not letting up.

“Not at all,” I answered. “Still, I would like to get married someday.”

Stanley was supposed to succeed our father, but he was still single. In the worst-case scenario, Stanley wouldn’t inherit Father’s barony and would live

out the rest of his life in the capital. In that case, I would have to produce Edigma's heir. I wouldn't need to give birth for a while, but I would need to find a husband before I passed marriageable age.

"Huh?" I mumbled.

The two men fell silent. I placed my milk tea on its saucer and looked at them. While Reynaldo stared at me with an icy smile, Albert donned a stern expression, as if puzzling over a difficult problem.

"That aside, we need to discuss the prince's marriage proposal," Reynaldo changed the subject, alleviating the strange atmosphere.

Indeed, this problem still hadn't been solved. Nevertheless, Albert had told me to leave everything concerning the prince to them. Upon remembering this, I looked at Reynaldo, my heart fluttering with a hint of anxiety.

"I would like you to leave this matter to Albert and me for the time being," Reynaldo continued. "But as things stand, we don't have a perfect solution. So long as you're in the palace, you might run into the prince."

"That's true," I agreed.

Though I couldn't help but feel flattered by the prince's interest in me, I couldn't allow things to go any further. Thus, I waited for Reynaldo to continue.

"Here's what I propose," he said. "I would like you to become a handmaid for the Rose duchy."

"A handmaid for who now?!" Albert cried out on my behalf. Based on his reaction, he hadn't known Reynaldo's plan either.

I've gone from villainess to baron's daughter. Now, I'm going from palace handmaid to ducal handmaid. When will I be able to settle on a single title?

"Mary is a handmaid for my chivalric order," Albert said. "That won't change going forward."

"She won't be able to escape from the prince or political struggles while at the palace," Reynaldo argued.

"Then I'll protect her."

“What could a mere knight with no skills other than swordsmanship possibly do?”

Were these two men truly my younger brother and childhood friend, whom I’d lived with so peacefully twenty years ago? I listened to their conversation, unable to speak out of fear.

“Can you say for certain that the Rose region is safe?” Albert asked. “The king’s subordinates might be hiding there. Who would protect Mary then?”

“You think there’s any place more dangerous than the palace?” Reynaldo countered. “Also, what do you plan on doing about Prince Rizel? You won’t be able to buy much more time.”

Albert had no response to that. Even as a young child, Reynaldo had been clever and well-spoken. He often outdebated Albert back then, despite being four years younger. However, the topic of this argument being what it was, I simply drained the rest of my cold tea, unsure what to do with myself.

“I, um...” I trailed off.

“Albert,” Reynaldo said. “I don’t want Rosemary to leave my sight ever again.”

When Reynaldo was drowning in his own anxiety in the Hubert region, I’d been falsely accused of attempted murder in the capital. Before either of us had been able to do anything, the situation took a dire turn. I could sense Reynaldo still shouldering those burdens.

“I feel the same way,” Albert responded. “I don’t want Mary to leave my side ever again.”

Similarly, Albert had been out on an expedition when I’d been condemned to death. Why hadn’t we been more wary of Grey, Tia, and Count Danzes? Every one of us carried regret in our hearts.

“Albert,” I called out the name of my knight. “Once this matter with the prince has settled down, may I return to the knights as a handmaid? I’ve only just learned how to do the job, and leaving permanently would make me sad.”

In my opinion, leaving the palace *was* the best plan. I attempted to strengthen Albert’s resolve. Personally, I had no interest in the palace, but

leaving Nicky and the knights—whose names I’d just learned—would make me feel lonely. Nevertheless, hiding the prince’s feelings for much longer would be impossible. Worse, someone could find a way to exploit his feelings by using me as a pawn in their own schemes.

During my time as Rosemary, I’d suffered a great deal of pain. I didn’t want to let anyone suffer any more in this life.

“Understood...” Albert sighed, radiating a painfully gloomy aura.

“Well then, Mary, the next time we see each other will be in my domain,” Reynaldo said.

After promising to proceed with the formalities right away, Reynaldo kissed me on the cheek, as he’d once done with Rosemary. This served as a greeting or goodbye, and since Reynaldo had become such a gentleman, it felt natural. At the same time, his kiss also felt as though it had come from a stranger. I had to suppress my embarrassment while kissing him back. Despite seeming happy that I’d returned the gesture, he still hid his morose expression during our parting. In all likelihood, this curse will bind us for the rest of our lives. Inevitably, our partings would always represent death.

Hoping to ease his pain, I smiled at him. “I look forward to seeing the Rose region.”

“Thank you,” Reynaldo answered. “I’ll prepare flowers that you and Rosemary like while I wait for you.”

In other words, he would prepare roses and marigolds. Judging from his strength of will, he would accomplish this no matter the season.

For the journey home, I convinced them to let me ride with Albert on his horse, as returning on the carriage would make me stand out too much. Albert said nothing while we galloped, causing me to worry that he still didn’t agree with the plan.

“Are you cold?” he finally asked me.

I shook my head. It was already dusk, and a crimson sky stretched above us. Albert slowed the horse to a walk, and finally it came to a stop.

“Albert?” I asked.

We’d reached an unpaved road with few pedestrians that passed along a field. Galloping here would have caused intense rocking. Despite being inside the castle town, this was an open space with few homes or people.

When I turned and looked up, Albert’s anguished face was dyed crimson in the setting sun. No, he didn’t agree with the plan. Even if he understood it logically, his feelings were another matter. Though he looked impassive, he was still emotional. This reminded me of my old childhood friend.

“Don’t worry, Albert,” I said. “This time, everything will turn out okay—I promise.”

I placed my fingers atop his hands, which were holding the reins. Calluses had formed on his rough hands, and his skin was scarred in places. The wounds he’d suffered in Rosemary’s absence spoke to his years of growth. Albert’s hands filled me with pride. All these years, he’d served as Rosemary’s knight, never falling to ruin. How could I not feel honored?

“Thank you for worrying about me,” I said.

Right now, I could convey to Albert the feelings I’d been unable to express during my past life. Setting aside our stations, he was my one and only knight.

“I have faith that you’ll protect me,” I told him.

As soon as I’d uttered these words, a pair of strong arms embraced me. Albert’s hands wrapped around my shoulders while he still held onto the reins. His olive-brown hair reached the base of my neck, tickling my cheeks. This sudden embrace shook me more than it embarrassed me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

Rather than answering me, Albert held me even tighter. As he squeezed me painfully tight, my embarrassment intensified.



I'd never been embraced so tightly by anyone other than a family member. Furthermore, Albert was more than ten years my senior. A scent different from my father's tickled my nostrils. Far from being unpleasant, it put me at ease. Though the strength with which Albert held me caused me to blush, I shifted my body and wrapped my arms around his back. Hopefully, my touch would calm him down. He had a masculine, sturdy back; the muscles were taut.

So, this is the back of my protector knight.

"Albert?" I asked again.

"It's nothing," he said. "I beg your pardon."

When I finally looked up, Albert was smiling at me, his face mere inches from mine. Relieved, I smiled back at him.

"Let's be on our way." He gripped the reins and urged the horse to walk.

I didn't know why Albert suddenly embraced me. As we rode, I recalled Albert's scent and warmth the whole way. Traces of both remained on my body.

My cheeks flushed the same crimson as the sky.

* * *

"ALBERT! Wait, Albert!"

A young man ran from the end of the corridor at full speed. Albert steeled himself when he saw it. He'd been expecting this confrontation. Apparently, the time had come.

"Prince Rizel," Albert said.

"What happened to Lady Mary?!" the prince cried. "Why can't I see her?!"

"Please lower your voice. We don't know who might be listening."

The prince—his long, red hair disheveled—scanned the area, realizing the gravity of the situation. Fortunately, there were no signs of anyone nearby.

"Come this way, if you would," Albert instructed, taking the prince to a shadowy area of the training grounds.

After confirming their solitude, Prince Rizel tore into Albert. “Over seven days have passed since I sent a letter asking after Mary. As I recall, you refused to let me meet her due to *urgent business*. Now you’ve gone to such great lengths to ignore me that it would be obvious to anyone.”

“I sincerely apologize.”

“I don’t want your contrition. I’m asking for an explanation.”

Albert frowned while taking in Prince Rizel’s single-minded expression. “Someone has noticed your interest in a particular handmaid. I was waiting to see how the situation played out.”

“Already?” the prince asked. “Isn’t this far too early?”

“Everyone wants to see you married as soon as possible, my prince. With you coming here more than once a week, it was only a matter of time.”

Albert wasn’t lying. Based on his recent behavior, rumors were circulating that Prince Rizel had set his sights on a particular handmaid. Even so, Mary herself hadn’t been identified.

As so often happens, only the person in question—in this case, Prince Rizel—was left in the dark.

“I don’t care about myself at this point,” Prince Rizel said. “Lady Mary hasn’t been harmed, has she?”

The prince had clearly fallen in love with Mary; his yearning for her grew each day. The more he met with her, the more he was attracted to her, his affections showing no signs of slowing. Though Prince Rizel had passed the normal age to be giddy with one’s first love, Albert recalled this disease all too well. No remedy existed for this affliction.

Regardless, not everything could turn out as the prince wished.

“When the time is right, I plan on entrusting Mary to Reynaldo as a handmaid of the Rose region,” Albert said.

For a split second, Prince Rizel’s expression took on a ferocious cast. “What did you say?”

Jealousy and possessiveness bloomed within the usually mild-mannered

prince. However, his expression soon returned to its normal state of composure.

“I see,” he said. “She certainly will be safe by Duke Reynaldo’s side. Yet even so...”

The Rose region—located to the north—was a great distance from the capital. The truth of this caused Albert a great deal of anguish as well.

“When things have settled down, Mary will return as a handmaid for the knights,” Albert said. “I promise.”

This would be for his own sake, not Prince Rizer’s.

“At the very least, I would like to see her one last time,” the prince said.

It was bitter for both of them, but Albert concealed his feelings when speaking to the prince. “Please have patience.”

After parting from Prince Rizer, who was composed now, Albert headed towards his office. Mary had finished her duties for the day and returned to her room. The tea that she’d brewed for Albert at noon still sat on his desk, having grown cold.

Sitting in his office chair, Albert let forth a groan of frustration and worry. Since meeting Mary and learning the truth about her identity, he hadn’t known where to direct his emotions. He’d been reunited with the woman he loved, despite having thought they would never see each other again. Being a reincarnation, Mary was no longer anyone’s fiancée. In fact, she was lower in station than Albert. Even now, the loyalty he’d sworn to Rosemary hadn’t changed in the slightest. The same was true of his love for her.

Albert envied Prince Rizer. If he could convey his feelings as the prince had done, how happy would he be? From a young age, Albert knew that his love for Rosemary could never be requited. In a nigh demonic fashion, his buried feelings and shallow desires had begun whispering to him, “Now’s your chance.”

Nevertheless, there were two deterrents for Albert: his unfulfilled vengeance and the danger of their current situation, which could end up harming Mary. Albert was almost grateful for these deterrents. They prevented him from doing

anything rash. Just being by Rosemary's side filled him with happiness, as it had in the past. Regardless of whether he could convey his feelings. Regardless of whether his love went unrequited. Rosemary had reincarnated as Mary, who now served as his handmaid. That was more than enough to bring him joy.

If Mary had merely been a handmaid who served me without remembering her past life, what would've happened, I wonder? If I didn't know her true identity, would I have fallen in love with her?

Thinking about useless what-ifs brought reality back to mind. Albert couldn't answer these questions. Even so, he'd always had a good impression of Mary. After showing up on the chivalric order's training grounds, she worked diligently, providing Albert with a peace of mind that alleviated his fatigue. Yes, this had been her job, but all the same, Albert could think of no greater solace.

Mary... Lady Rosemary.

The faces of both appeared in his mind and vanished. They had upended his life beyond comparison. Would it have been easier to hate them for that? How wonderful would it have been to swear his loyalty and be done with the matter? Now that Rosemary's reincarnation had appeared before his very eyes, his internal equilibrium seemed liable to collapse.

Even so, he would serve as her knight, for his unfaltering loyalty existed alongside her soul. Being Rosemary's knight was the only thing that preserved Albert's sense of self. He couldn't manipulate the situation in his favor and lock Mary away, as Reynaldo had done. Likewise, he couldn't whisper his love into Mary's ear, as Prince Rizel had done.

Since childhood, Albert's singular way of loving Rosemary had been to serve as her knight. This method had always belonged to him and him alone.

Chapter Three: She Doesn't Want Revenge

THE days passed by in a hectic blur. Not long ago, I'd been living in the countryside village of Edigma. When I received an unexpected summons, I started working at the magnificent royal castle. Shortly afterward, I'd begun serving the resplendent chivalric order. Now, I would become a handmaid for the Rose duchy, where the northern winds blew pleasantly through the mountains.

"What a lovely view," I said.

"I thought you of all people would appreciate it," Reynaldo answered.

I rode in a carriage engraved with Duke Rose's seal, which had been fashioned after his namesake. All the while, I gazed outside my window at the enormous mountains surrounding this land. Of all people, my future master—Duke Rose himself—sat opposite me. He'd offered to travel with me, using the time to complete his paperwork.

Honestly, I was grateful for his kindness. If you rode a series of luggage wagons, the journey from the capital to the Rose region could last quite a while. Comparatively, a carriage ride would take an entire day, and if you galloped on horseback, you would arrive in a little over half a day. That being said, I didn't know how to gallop a horse, and I didn't have money to spend on a carriage. Albert had offered to deliver me there on horseback himself, but I couldn't allow the high commander to escort a mere handmaid. As I'd struggled to make a decision, Reynaldo had offered me this lifeline. In the end, I accepted his proposal, and the rest was history.

While sitting across from me, Reynaldo refolded his long legs countless times. The lengthy carriage ride seemed to fatigue him. During our meetings in the cafeteria near the capital, he'd radiated an intimidating aura. Now, he emanated calmness, perhaps due in part to returning to his home region.

Reynaldo's slightly overgrown bangs had a springy bounce to them, similar to

Rosemary's. When his hair was pulled back, the color was difficult to discern, but in the dim light of the carriage, it appeared light brown. As a young boy, his hair had been as blond as Rosemary's, but apparently it had darkened with age. Perhaps this was the same color as his mother's hair.

Reynaldo looked up at me, smiling gently. "What's wrong?"

"It just reoccurred to me how mature you've become."

"Well, it has been a long time."

Reynaldo placed his hand on mine and kept smiling gently, and the unease lurking in my heart dissolved. Talking to him helped me regain my composure. My nervousness about visiting a new land faded.

"I apologize about the possible workload," Reynaldo said, "but to be completely honest, I employ the fewest possible servants at my manor."

"Is that so?"

"Indeed. I don't like having too many people around. Oh, but that doesn't apply to you, Mary. Since we've finally reunited, I'd like you to work as my personal handmaid."

I nodded. "Understood."

Normally, serving as a feudal lord's handmaid was a prestigious job. I might have been a novice, but I wanted to be as much help to Reynaldo as possible, even if that didn't amount to much.

As the horses whinnied, the carriage came to a halt. When I peeked out the window, we were parked in front of a newly constructed city gate.

"We've arrived," Reynaldo announced.

There was a townscape smaller than the royal capital outside. Nonetheless, I still noticed rows of small houses and a variety of people buying and selling items on the well-paved roads. The faces I glimpsed made me feel out of place.

"Many immigrants live in the Rose region," Reynaldo explained. "Villagers who live alongside the mountain range visit in groups to buy and sell goods."

"How wonderful!"

Everything for sale is an item or shape I'm not used to seeing in the capital. If they're foreign products, that makes sense.

The scents of unfamiliar foods wafted towards me from various directions. Some smelled sweet, while others smelled spicy. These sights filled me with excitement, yet before too long, the carriage came to another stop. Looking forward, a large mansion towered upward from inside a forest.

"This is my manor," Reynaldo said.

"It's quite far from the city, isn't it?"

After passing through the front gate, we rode through the forest for a while. Gradually, the clamor of the city faded, and we continued down the quiet, wooded road. The construction of the manor seemed rather cautious for a feudal lord. When I saw the residence up close, its antiquated design felt out of place amongst the city's many newer buildings.

"I've left this manor unchanged from its time under a previous lord," Reynaldo said. "Despite being old, I find it elegant."

Oh, I see. Coming from Reynaldo, that makes sense, seeing as he's never shown much interest in himself.

When the carriage stopped, Reynaldo disembarked first, holding out his hand to me from the door. Without hesitation, I took his hand and disembarked as well. The manor's servants had lined up in front of the house in anticipation of their master's return. Indeed, the number of workers seemed quite low considering the size of the house.

"Welcome home," the servants said in unison.

"Thank you," Reynaldo answered. "This is Mary, who will be serving as my personal handmaid starting today. Mary, please greet everyone."

"I-It's a pleasure to meet all of you," I stammered.

Reynaldo's sudden shift to feudal lord shook me, causing my voice to go shrill. I'd asked him to act as my superior in public, but I'd also been the one to act flustered when the time finally arrived.

"I'll leave Mary in your capable hands, Lieber," Reynaldo said. "Mary, this is

Lieber.”

An elderly man stepped out from the line of attendants. His face revived Rosemary’s memories.

I remember him.

“My name is Lieber,” he said. “I’m Lord Reynaldo’s butler.”

I shook his proffered hand. “And my name is Mary Edigma. I look forward to working with you.”

Lieber was one of the butlers who’d taken care of Reynaldo and Rosemary as children. His family had served the Huberts for generations. To the best of my recollection, Lieber’s older brother had served Rosemary’s father personally.

“Allow me to show you around the manor,” Lieber said.

In response, I bowed slightly. Then I parted with Reynaldo and entered the manor’s entrance. A pleasant, floral aroma filled my nostrils. The flower vases decorating the halls contained roses and marigolds. I smiled. Reynaldo had kept his promise.

“The servants live in this wing,” Lieber said. “However, since you’ll be serving the duke personally, I’ve prepared a room for you in his wing.”

“Oh, um, really?”

Lieber’s outrageous statement caught me by surprise. We’d been walking down the corridor while he explained the layout of the manor.

“Don’t worry—everyone in this mansion can keep a secret,” he assured me. “No matter what happens, we won’t speak a word of this to the public.”

“Huh...? Um, it’s not like that. You’ve got the totally wrong idea!”

Flustered, I denied it when I realized that Lieber was implying an improper relationship between Reynaldo and me.

Lieber looked somewhat disappointed by that. “Is that so? We servants were all rejoicing that the young master had finally found love.”

“Lord Reynaldo and I have a complicated history, but we don’t have, um, *that* sort of relationship.”

As Lieber observed my flushed-face denial, he let forth a deliberate, genial laugh. “Well, you never know what might happen, Your Grace.”

Why was a higher-ranking butler going so far as to call me *Your Grace*? In all likelihood, he was welcoming me into the manor as a potential wife for Duke Reynaldo Rose—a longtime bachelor. I could only deny these allegations, picking up my pace as I strode across the soft carpet.

But unfortunately...

Though Lieber might have been half-joking, rumors had probably spread throughout the manor. I had just arrived at my new workplace, and I already had to worry about my position.



REYNALDO hadn’t felt so content with his life since Rosemary’s death. When her soul returned to him, he even praised God, whom he’d once lost faith in and begun to detest. This miracle seemed like the perfect opportunity to reveal his revenge to Rosemary. Nevertheless, his tender-hearted older sister hadn’t desired vengeance.

How compassionate and cruel of her. The gears had been in motion for two decades, and Reynaldo couldn’t reverse them. Even so, he couldn’t do anything to bring despair upon Mary—his sister’s virtuous reincarnation. Though he burned with vengeance, he hadn’t lost his sanity. Thus, he decided to end matters faster by adjusting his schemes slightly. Nothing ever went exactly according to plan, after all.

First, there had been a minor setback in the plot to find Prince Rizel a fiancée. When the prince showed no signs of choosing a bride from the handmaids, Reynaldo panicked. If Prince Rizel fell in love with a young noblewoman, Reynaldo had planned to win her over to his side.

At long last, Albert informed Reynaldo that Prince Rizel had found a match. Without delay, Reynaldo sprung into action. Unfortunately, the first major upset to his plans had occurred here. Prince Rizel fell for the reincarnation of Rosemary, whom Reynaldo had never stopped loving and revering. Meeting Mary had filled him with joy. Without his scheme to gather handmaids in the palace, this miraculous reunion never would have occurred.

Next, he spoke to the nobles who were conspiring with him to rebel against the king. “I’ve run into some unexpected difficulties with the plan,” he’d told them, revealing nothing else.

According to the original plan, Reynaldo would win the prince’s prospective fiancée over to his side. However, he refused to include Mary in his schemes. Regardless, Reynaldo had no obstacles barring his path, even if matters didn’t proceed according to plan.

If anything, he wanted to exact his vengeance as soon as possible and spend the extra time with Mary. Originally, Reynaldo wanted Queen Tia to suffer the same fate as Rosemary. Everything concerning Prince Rizel had been for that end. Watching a lowly handmaid steal the queen’s position would have been most gratifying. Still, he couldn’t force Mary to play along. That had been enough to stay his hand.

Vengeance aside, Mary had returned to him. He wanted to zip through his work and go speak with her. Over the years, he’d gone out less and less and drowned himself in work. With Mary by his side, he would change his lifestyle, spending his days however she wished. Joy overflowed from the bottom of his heart. He could now live the life he’d dreamed of as a child.

However, a certain rival wanted to prevent him from achieving this dream. When Reynaldo revealed his plan to shelter Mary, Albert donned an unforgettable expression. That had been the face of a man burning with envy, not that of a loyal retainer. Reynaldo knew of Albert’s feelings for Rosemary and—by extension—Mary all too well.

Worst of all, there was also the matter of Prince Rizel. The son of Rosemary’s murderers having fallen in love with her sickened Reynaldo. He needed to execute his plan as soon as possible. After exacting his vengeance, he would tear Albert away from Mary and force Prince Rizel to give up.

Mary cannot leave my side.

Fortunately, he could bind her to him through marriage, which wouldn’t have been possible when they were siblings. Did Reynaldo idolize Mary as an older sister, or did he desire her as a woman? His love had become so distorted over the years that he could no longer tell. Either way, he would use any means

necessary to keep her close.

Reynaldo opened the door to his secret villa. Inside were members of the neutral faction and Count Danzes' former detractors. Reynaldo had built up these connections over the past twenty years.

Let's end this quickly so that I may return to Mary.

His home would always be by his sister's side.

"My apologies for the wait," he said. "Let us begin."

After unfolding a floor plan of the castle atop the table, Reynaldo began speaking. The champagne glasses—which he'd prepared to strengthen the bonds of complicity—produced a beautiful reflection of the Ice Duke's smile.

* * *

DEAR Mary,

Upon learning that you became a handmaid for the chivalric order in my absence, I went to visit you, only to learn that you'd relocated to Rose. What are you even doing? At any rate, don't cause any trouble for the duke.

Oh, and put in a good word for me while you're there.

Sincerely,

Stanley Edigma

I shoved Stanley's letter back into its envelope. A fair amount of time had passed since I'd arrived in the Rose region, and this was my first letter from him. I hardly felt like responding, but I couldn't ignore my brother. Thus, I withdrew a piece of stationery from the drawer.

Dear Stanley,

If you have to ask me what I'm doing through a letter, you're already too late, don't you think? Also, what kind of older brother would ask his sister to talk him up rather than show concern for her?

Sincerely,

I needed to write a few more letters. After placing a new piece of stationery on my desk, I looked over several other missives I'd received. Shortly after my arrival in Rose, I sent a letter to Father, telling him my current location. A while later, he wrote back, expressing his relief and giving me recommendations on the regional cuisine. Much to everyone's surprise, my father was quite the gourmet. His tips proved very useful.

Later, I received a letter from Albert, whose handwriting was rather clumsy. He asked after my well-being in stiff letters that slanted diagonally upward. According to him, many knights had complained about my sudden transfer, and everyone would be pleased if I returned sooner rather than later. Reading this delighted me, putting an unbidden smile on my face.

A letter from Nicky had arrived with Albert's. *"Did you actually have your eyes on Duke Rose this whole time?"* she asked me rather outrageously. I'd written her back a polite correction on the matter.

Nicky also wrote about Albert. Perhaps my romantic fulfillment was her personal goal. Albert appeared to be dispirited and lonely since my departure. *"He also acts irritated from time to time,"* Nicky had added. *"If you returned to the castle, I'm sure he'd feel better. I'd like you to come back soon as well. I miss having someone to talk to."*

Though Albert's condition worried me, I doubted whether my return would improve anything. Nonetheless, my desire to reunite with Nicky deepened, as we'd grown very close. *"I want to see you as well,"* I wrote back to her.

Last was Prince Rizel's letter. With a poet's flourish, he apologized for causing my transfer and lamented being unable to see me. He'd certainly received the best possible education.

If not for his princely duties, could he become a poet, I wonder? Or does he have someone edit for him?

Regardless, this was a love letter. A cloying one at that. Reading its full contents required a great deal of time.

I mixed empty flatteries into my response to Prince Rizel. Honestly, I didn't

know the best way to deal with him. I'd told him countless times that I couldn't become the crown prince's fiancée. He'd interpreted this as me being worried about shouldering a heavy responsibility. He promised to protect me multiple times, through letters and spoken words.

That's not my reason.

I remembered what Rosemary had wished for in her dying moments. As Mary, I shared her dream, and I wouldn't be able to fulfill her wish as the crown prince's fiancée. Even so, Prince Rizel's persistence in proclaiming his feelings had undeniably shaken my heart.

Sighing, I confirmed that the ink had dried on the stationery and placed the letter in an envelope.

Responding to Albert's letter was causing me the most grief. Whenever I remembered what Nicky wrote, I found myself unable to compose my thoughts. As the tip of my brush hovered over the paper, I tried and failed to come up with a decent reply.

"I'm safe and doing well," I wrote. "Once things have calmed down, please let me return to being a handmaid for the knights."

I'd grown more comfortable at my former workplace than I ever would have imagined.

After finishing my letters, I headed towards the mailbox near the castle gate. Dusk had already fallen, and stars had begun twinkling in the distant sky.

"Mary," a voice called to me from behind.

When I turned around, Lieber was standing there. He held a tray in one hand, and a scarf hung from his other arm. "Since we're in a basin, Rose grows very cold this time of year," he said, holding out the scarf.

I accepted the garment gratefully. "Thank you very much."

Lieber also handed me one of the two cups resting atop the tray. I accepted the cup, which contained freshly brewed tea.



Had Lieber brought me tea and a scarf because he'd been watching over me? I braced myself for a conversation, but the old butler drank his tea in silence. We stood in front of the castle gates and observed the scenery without speaking. Since the gates stood atop a hill, we could see a vague outline of the townscape. As night approached, the city's dazzling lights grew ever more noticeable. Compared to those lively illuminations, the manor felt deathly quiet.

"Master Lieber," I said.

"Yes?" he asked.

"How long have you served Lord Reynaldo?"

"When Reynaldo's father, Marquis Hubert, was demoted in rank, many of his servants were forced to resign. Reynaldo offered to hire me when I was struggling to find a new post."

"Then that means..." I trailed off.

"Lord Reynaldo was only thirteen at the time."

In other words, Reynaldo had poached an excellent servant like Lieber while still a child. He never ceased to amaze me.

"My older brother served as Marquis Hubert's personal butler," Lieber continued. "While I languished under them, Reynaldo came to me, asking for my help. Having such a young boy request my aid amused me, and so I decided to follow him." At this, Lieber laughed. "And look how interesting things have turned out. That aside, I had a question for you as well, Mary. When did you become acquainted with Lord Reynaldo, exactly?"

"I met him through Sir Albert," I hedged.

"Ah, is that so?"

Judging from his nostalgic tone, Lieber and Albert were also old acquaintances.

"I've been watching Lord Reynaldo for over twenty years, but whenever I see him speaking with you, it reminds me of the old days," Lieber said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

I took a gulp of tea to regain my composure. Lieber's keen insight worried me.

As Lieber took another sip of tea, he looked up at the sky, seeming to remember something beyond the stars. "I'm reminded of Reynaldo spending time with his older sister. Those are such nostalgic memories."

"By Reynaldo's older sister, do you mean...?"

"The supposed villainess who was executed over twenty years ago for treason. However, I knew Rosemary myself, and she was no villainess."

Lieber's words caused my pulse to spike.

I'm so happy.

The entire country had branded Rosemary as a villainess. In fact, the words Rosemary and villainess had become synonymous. Even so, some of those who'd known her—if only a few—hadn't believed the rumors. This warmed my heart.

"Do you know of the mausoleum?" Lieber asked.

"Mausoleum?" I repeated.

Lieber pointed to one edge of the manor. "You need to know this as well. That structure is a mausoleum, and Lord Reynaldo has forbidden anyone to approach it. He visits the building every day. None of us has ever been inside. It's most likely Rosemary's grave."

"Huh...?" I asked.

That can't be true.

Rosemary had been executed as a criminal. In Dirésias, criminals weren't laid to rest, disallowing them from joining God. Instead, they were cremated. I'd assumed that Rosemary had received the same treatment.

"It's just a rumor, but you mustn't enter it regardless, even out of curiosity," Lieber warned me. "Many years ago, a thief broke into the building, and no one ever heard another word of him. Afterwards, rumors circulated that if you set foot in the mausoleum, you would never come out again."

He said the last part playfully, but it was probably the truth. I gulped down the

rest of my tea, feeling chilly despite the scarf.

“Well then, it’s almost time for dinner,” Lieber said. “Lord Reynaldo will probably be home in the evening.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

Lieber and I walked back towards the manor. Lately, Reynaldo had been going out for work quite often, but even so, he always returned home around dinnertime. Likewise, he would always come see me. He’d surely return today as well, galloping on horseback beneath the starry sky. Afterwards, I would welcome him home, just as I’d done in the past.

Right before entering the manor, I looked up to see a shooting star streak across the sky. I’ve heard that falling stars represent good or bad fortune.

Hopefully, this one is foretelling something good.

With that heartfelt prayer, I closed the door to the manor.

✱ ✱ ✱

RIZEL read the letter from the woman he loved over and over again. He went over each word countless times until they were burned into his memory. Between his official duties, he took it out of his breast pocket. Whenever he had an unexpected break, he would recall the letter, read it again, and reflect on its contents.

He fully recognized the contents of the letter as empty flatteries. However, suffering from his first ever love sickness, Mary’s letter might as well have been a good luck charm, for it banished all his worries.

For the first nineteen years of his life, Rizel had no interest in romance. In fact, he’d considered himself completely detached from it. As the king’s sole heir, Rizel grew up in a different environment from the average person. Obviously, people other than Rizel—including his relatives—could inherit the throne. Yet, as the current king’s only legitimate son, he’d been raised as the future monarch from a young age.

Having spent most of his time around adults, Rizel had difficulty understanding people his own age. He’d spoken to the children of household

retainers and vassals, but he'd never been able to empathize with them. Likewise, he'd never experienced feelings towards the opposite sex.

Rizel knew how to interact with women within the bounds of common sense. On an intellectual level, he understood how to charm and treat them. This might have been a callous way of phrasing things, but similar to learning swordsmanship, he'd also been taught how to handle women. Honestly, he'd considered this information unnecessary, but now he was grateful for it.

He might have far outranked Mary, but she was still the daughter of a baron. She might have been a noblewoman in name only, but this would suffice for the royal family, which placed a great deal of value on hierarchies.

Nevertheless, Rizel learned through experience that things wouldn't always go his way, no matter how persistent he was. Mary had conveyed to him in no uncertain terms that she didn't want to become queen. Her aversion to the idea exceeded mere feelings of unworthiness. Rizel didn't want to force her to become queen either.

Despite the severity of his lovesickness, Rizel couldn't close his eyes to the truth. He'd been raised to govern a kingdom, not to become a normal man. He would never abandon his duties, but his heart wasn't so weak that he would give up on the woman he loved. Furthermore, it was the first time he couldn't have what he wanted. He enjoyed the unfamiliar emotions this had given rise to. Thus, he had no intention of ending things due to the situation feeling impossible or hopeless. So long as there was more in his power to do to win Mary's heart, the prince wouldn't be able to give up on love.

However, the current monarchy was too weak and fragile for Rizel to prioritize himself. He foresaw a great disturbance upsetting the monarchy in the near future.

First of all, the neutral faction had been acting suspiciously. Within the kingdom, an unspoken division existed between the conservative and royal factions. Count Danzes had once led the conservative faction, and they now supported the queen. Of course, the royal faction had supported the king for generations. Despite this division, Rizel had heard of the neutralists' strange behavior from both of these factions.

When the search for Rizel's fiancée suddenly began, the prince assumed this to have been the royal faction's doing. Upon further investigation, he'd been wrong. That worried him. Rizel personally employed his household retainers to investigate the inner political workings. Their report had been delayed as their investigation had encountered unforeseen troubles.

Not long ago, one of Rizel's investigators came back with a single name: Reynaldo Rose. Upon hearing this, the prince merely nodded. The Ice Duke had a keen intellect. That being said, he didn't belong to the conservative, neutral, or royal factions. He appeared unaffiliated with any political entity but climbed his way to his current position without any concern regardless.

Of course, that hadn't been the case. Yes, Reynaldo had improved relations with their neighboring country and quashed the rebellion led by the small tribes. Nevertheless, he still needed connections to curry favor with the court.

King Grey and Count Danzes were wary of Reynaldo. They'd investigated him countless times. The results had uncovered a variety of suspected co-conspirators who belonged to both the royal and neutral factions. Whenever King Grey or Count Danzes attempted to entrap Reynaldo, his allies protested, raising their voices in his defense. In other words, Reynaldo had placed himself in a position where neither of them could lay a hand on him.

Rizel could sense Reynaldo moving his plans into action. The change was so subtle that he wouldn't have noticed it in the past. For someone who planned as meticulously and showed as little weakness as Reynaldo, he seemed to be acting with haste.

Much as Rizel respected Reynaldo, he was still the prince. He was capable of participating in monarchical duties to some degree. Likewise, he'd started governing on his father's behalf an increasing amount. Perhaps now, Rizel could heal the fractures that his father had caused by entrusting political administration to his vassals. For his efforts to bear fruit, Rizel planned to regain the people's trust day by day.

Rizel owed a great debt to Reynaldo for being his teacher. All the same, Rizel would have no choice but to stop the duke if he became an impediment. The prince had his own battles to fight, after all.

When a meeting of court ministers decided on the search for Rizel's fiancée, the prince gave his consent. It had been necessary to maintain peace. Rizel knew as well as anyone that he needed to produce an heir as soon as possible. Still, the idea of his prospective fiancée being used as a political tool gave him pause. He would rather postpone his engagement until after all these other matters had been settled.

"Choosing Prince Rizel's fiancée from any faction will only cause the court to splinter further," someone had said. "In that case, why don't we have the prince choose from a group of women working as handmaids?"

Who had suggested this idea?

The scent of strong perfume and makeup clung to Rizel wherever he went. He'd even felt proud of himself for not growing to despise women. However, when visiting Albert under the pretext of running away, he'd met one particular woman. Until then, he hadn't noticed any of the women in the palace doing their jobs. Thus, the way she'd faithfully performed her handmaid duties had been a breath of fresh air.

Rizel had considered her an intelligent woman from their first meeting. The prince had concealed himself with light garb and hidden his face. Even so, Mary had greeted him with proper conduct rather than treating him as untrustworthy. In short, she'd approached him in a way that wouldn't cause displeasure while remaining cautious. Ever since then, Rizel regarded her as special.

Then he fell for her all too easily, even wishing for her to become his queen.

How reassuring would it be to have Mary supporting me?

As the future king, Mary's queenly dignity attracted Rizel more and more. Yet, because of her many desirable qualities, he wasn't the only one unable to resist her allure. Not long after a lovestruck Rizel started visiting Mary in secret, she'd been transferred to a faraway land—specifically, to Duke Rose's domain.

At first, Rizel worried that Reynaldo was using her. The duke would have reasons for doing so. He could have used Mary as a pawn to conspire against Rizel himself. In response to the prince's concern, Albert had told him in no uncertain terms not to worry.

“Lord Reynaldo would never do anything to harm Lady Mary,” Albert had assured him.

Did someone known as the Ice Duke truly mean her no harm? Razel was still worried, but Albert’s words carried weight, considering his close relationship with Reynaldo. He didn’t understand the true meaning behind Albert’s words, but no matter what happened to Mary, she would probably be safe with the high commander as an ally.

After all, Albert had fallen in love with Mary as well.

If Razel was ignorant in matters of romance, Albert was even clumsier. His feelings for Mary were plain for all to see, and his words only made his affections all the more obvious. Despite looking impassive, the depths of Albert’s eyes burned with discontent. Razel felt sorry for him, but he had no intention of backing down simply because the high commander had one-sided feelings for Mary. No matter how much Razel respected the man, he and the royal family needed her.

While the prince and Albert might have been enemies in love, the latter would never do anything to harm her. Therefore, when the high commander called Razel to his office, the prince headed there obediently. He pressed his hand to the letter hidden in his breast pocket once. Then Razel knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Albert called out.

Razel opened the door. The high commander was preparing tea while sitting on the sofa.

“What happened to your other handmaid?” the prince asked, thinking it unusual for Albert to prepare tea himself.

“She has the day off. We’ve been short-staffed since Mary left.”

After encouraging Razel to sit, Albert handed him a cup of tea. The steaming beverage was an herbal tea with a somewhat strong aroma. This struck Razel as odd. Albert usually didn’t care for herbal flavors.

“To be honest, I received this tea as a gift, but it’s not to my liking,” Albert explained. “Would you mind drinking it for me?”

How very much like you, Rizel thought with a chuckle, taking a drink of the tea. Despite its strong aroma, it tasted fine.

“Well then, what was your reason for summoning me?” Rizel asked.

“What indeed?” Albert responded. “I thought you of all people would have realized by now.”

In response, Rizel raised his guard. Presumably, he was talking about Reynaldo.

Albert prepared his own tea using different leaves from Rizel’s. It was the citrus tea he’d taken a liking to as of late. Ever since Mary started working as his handmaid, he’d drunk it almost exclusively. Before then, Albert hadn’t shown any preference for tea or other refreshments. Usually, he drank whatever his servants prepared for him.

Unease crept into Rizel’s mind. Who would give Albert tea as a gift? As the prince took another sip of his drink, his consciousness grew hazy. A bizarre fatigue overcame him.

“Wha...?” Rizel mumbled.

He couldn’t articulate his words as he’d expected. Disbelieving, he struggled to open his half-lidded eyes, staring at Albert. As the high commander looked back at Rizel apologetically, the prince collapsed onto the soft couch. His fragrant cup of tea clattered onto the floor.

Mary’s letter was always tucked in his breast pocket. That way, he would never forget what she always wrote at the end. He’d reflected upon these words so many times, committing them to memory.

“I’m praying from the bottom of my heart that you become a wonderful king for your people.”

I wanted to become a wonderful king for your sake as well, Rizel thought. *For you are also one of my citizens.*



ANOTHER day of serving as the duke’s personal handmaid came to an end. I washed my tired body in the bathroom, which I was grateful to have been

provided with. Afterwards, I changed into my pajamas and dove into the bed that had been prepared for me.

Just as Reynaldo had said, a manor with so few staff members necessitated a great deal of work. This was probably the norm. The capital had been overflowing with handmaids during my time there, but in all likelihood, the palace was usually this busy.

I felt moderately fatigued, but as I began to doze off, someone knocked at the door.

“Who is it?” I called out, sitting up in bed.

“It’s me,” Reynaldo responded. “May I come in for a minute?”

I jumped out of bed and hurried towards the door. Reynaldo stood on the other side, adorned in pitch black clothing.

“Come on in,” I said.

When I invited Reynaldo in, he looked surprised before donning an amused smile. “I don’t know if I should be pleased or saddened by your lack of caution.”

“Should I have something to fear?”

“I might have been your younger brother once, but we’re practically strangers now, aren’t we?”

Contrary to his words, Reynaldo entered my room without hesitation. I began to prepare tea, but he stopped me.

“I’ll be returning to work after a short conversation,” he said.

His gentle tone relieved me some. During work, Reynaldo acted as coldly as his moniker would suggest. He attended to his duties with an air of indifference, only interacting with others when necessary. He even treated me the same. I could respect him for not allowing his personal feelings to interfere with work, but at the same time, he also seemed lonely.

However, as time passed, he spoke to me more casually, which I considered a positive development. A third party might have viewed his current manner of speech as strange, but from my perspective, I found it relaxing.

“It seems like you’ve gotten used to your job,” Reynaldo noted.

“Yes, I find it very fulfilling.”

“Lieber is thrilled that I brought home such a capable handmaid.”

I responded with an empty laugh. *Presumably, he’s also pleased that you brought home a potential bride,* I thought.

“That aside, I need to speak to you about the coming days,” Reynaldo returned to the main topic.

When I looked at him, Reynaldo suddenly seemed to notice that I was standing. He placed a gentle hand on my lower back, sitting me down on the bed. However, since he remained standing, it was my turn to direct him to sit on the spot next to me. During our childhoods, we often sat next to each other in bed when he hadn’t been able to sleep. I’d hold his small hand to soothe him. Now I had to look up at him.

“I can’t go into detail, but pandemonium will soon sweep the capital,” Reynaldo said. “I plan on taking advantage of the chaos to nullify the crown prince’s fiancée selection.”

“You can do that?” I asked.

“Not through my power alone, but it will be possible.”

The ease with which Reynaldo spoke those words surprised me. How much manpower did he think it took to move an entire country?

“Originally, various nobles and I had plans regarding the prince’s fiancée selection—as well as other related matters—in motion,” Reynaldo explained. “Those plans are simply being expedited.”

“What’s going to happen, exactly?”

“Unfortunately, I can’t tell you right now.”

I frowned. “Is there anything I can do?”

Even as I asked, I knew the answer would be *no*. Nevertheless, being unable to lend any help at all was frustrating.

“There is,” Reynaldo answered, peering at me with his jade eyes. “Something

only you can do.” He grabbed my hand, which had already been close to his, and pulled me into a tight hug. “Don’t disappear from my side ever again.”

Reynaldo whispered these words into my ear as if speaking a prayer. In response, I silently hugged him back.



A few days later, Reynaldo departed for the royal capital alone. After I watched him leave his domain on a fast horse, I returned to work. While I performed my duties, a faint uneasiness remained inside me.

Is this really for the best?

A lingering discomfort throbbed in my chest, as if I were being kept in the dark. When I looked up towards the sky, birds flapped their wings cheerfully. I gazed at these winged creatures from inside the tightly locked manor, feeling as though my own confines were a birdcage.

As I cleaned Reynaldo’s office per my daily routine, something on the bookshelves caught my eye.

“Oh, how nostalgic!” I cried out.

It was a picture book about a princess and a knight who swore loyalty to her. Rosemary loved this book dearly. Without thinking, I reached for the picture book, which stood out amidst the complex technical books that dominated the shelves.

I flipped through the old book. Had Reynaldo brought this with him from the Hubert manor? Whatever the case, I kept leafing through it while basking in nostalgia. Rosemary had read this book so many times, but the story felt brand new to me as I remembered it vaguely.

The story was easily understandable, as it had been written to delight young girls. It was about a wicked king who’d imprisoned a princess. After rescuing the princess from the king, a knight swore his loyalty to her. While under the knight’s protection, the princess married a prince, and the two of them brought joy to their country.

Rosemary hadn’t been interested in the prince at all. Instead, she’d wondered

why the princess didn't marry the knight. Now that I reconsidered it, the picture book was based on a civil war that occurred within our country.

According to our history, a knight once purged a corrupt king. In order to establish a new monarch, a distant relative of the king was summoned to the capital as the new prince. He'd then entered into a political marriage with the princess, who'd been the former king's only blood relative.

That moment, my unease disappeared in a flash. As I hurried out of the room, my feelings of disbelief and suspicion warred with each other. Unable to stand still, I raced towards the stables.

"No, this is hopeless," I said to myself.

I didn't know how to ride a horse, so I couldn't do anything from this far away. Frustration roiled inside me. I needed to reach Reynaldo as fast as possible and stop him, for just like the knight in the story, he was going to purge the king. Nagged by these suspicions, I used my momentum to fling myself atop a horse. Startled, the horse bucked wildly. I clung to the beast with all my might.

No, I couldn't do this.

But what about Rosemary?

Horseback riding had been part of her training as a noblewoman and the future queen.

"Please, Rosemary!" I shouted.

This is to save your brother.

I slogged through Rosemary's memories for her education in horseback riding, which I'd never experienced in this life. I skillfully pulled the reins and stroked the horse's mane.

No need to worry. I can do this.

Thankfully, the road had been paved to accommodate immigrants. It was a risky gamble, but if I didn't act now, I would regret it. The horse raced forward. I gripped the reins, swearing to myself that I wouldn't let go.



“ALBERT!” Prince Rizel bellowed.

A small pang of guilt shot through Albert’s chest. Nevertheless, he locked the door with grim determination. According to Reynaldo, if Prince Rizel appeared during the coup, it would complicate matters. Thus, Albert had summoned the prince before the uprising, drugging him when he’d least expected it.

Reynaldo gave Albert tea containing a sleeping drug. The high commander felt guilty, as Prince Rizel had trusted him for many years. Even so, he still planned on imprisoning the prince in the guardroom. He was prepared for any future punishment.

Just before Albert closed the door, Prince Rizel opened his eyes and sat up in bed, locking eyes with him.

“Albert!” the prince cried. “What’s going on?!”

“Everything will be over soon,” Albert responded. “Please wait there in the meantime.”

Afterwards, he entrusted one of the knights he’d conspired with to watch over the prince and left the guardroom. Though Albert could hear Prince Rizel pound on the door, he couldn’t let guilt overcome him. Reynaldo’s letter instructed him to put the plan into motion today. Presumably, he and the neutralists—or rather, the anti-royalists—were headed towards the castle right now. In order to purge this country of its widespread corruption, they would capture the king and queen and establish Prince Rizel as the new monarch.

Such was the revenge Reynaldo had devised.

Upon hearing this, Albert immediately remembered a certain picture book from his past. Albert could intuit Reynaldo’s feelings. The man was modeling his revenge after the story Rosemary had loved. In other words, he’d taken these actions with her in mind.

After meeting Mary, Albert learned that his former liege didn’t desire revenge in the slightest. Throughout her life, Rosemary cared for her people and her family. She’d even gone to her death wishing for peace. Though Albert and Reynaldo understood this intellectually, their emotions were another matter.

Even now, when Albert thought about Rosemary’s murderers still being alive,

hatred gnawed at his heart. At the same time, exacting revenge in a cruel manner would torment Mary. He'd become an ogre who burned with vengeance, but Albert still understood this all too well.

Regardless, he followed Reynaldo's plan to finally exact their vengeance. Albert's heart pounded with excitement. The dream he'd chased after for so many years was close at hand. Yet simultaneously, he felt empty. He'd spent twenty years in pursuit of this goal, and now it was coming to an end this easily? It felt strangely anticlimactic.

Albert mounted his horse, intent on finishing the job. The distance between the chivalric order's territory and the main palace was short, but just in case, Albert traveled on horseback. At that moment, another horse whinnied in the distance. Suspicious, Albert galloped toward the noise.

Since he'd falsified a royal decree to give most people time off, only the minimum number of servants remained within the now-silent castle. The present majority were anti-royalists.

Distantly, Albert heard the faint cries of a woman along with the horse's whinnying. Giving his own horse's saddle a powerful kick, he raced onward. People gathered here and there, having also heard the horse, and created a stir throughout the castle grounds. In preparation for the coup, Albert had placed his guards strategically throughout the castle. This had paid off. A few of his knights were also heading towards the gates.

Albert rode through the crowd of people. A horse rampaged outside the gates.

"Mary!" he shouted, his eyes widening in disbelief.

She clung to her horse in a desperate attempt to control it. His heart nearly stopped. Albert galloped beside the wild beast. In a panic, he somehow grabbed hold of its reins. Something had agitated Mary's horse, and no amount of soothing would calm it down. Mary herself clutched the reins with a white-knuckled grip. Albert couldn't bear to watch her struggle.

"Jump on my horse!" he shouted reflexively.

Mary looked up in surprise, but when she saw Albert, she made up her mind.

When the horses were next to each other, she flung her arms around Albert's neck and leaped over. He pulled her firmly into his arms and maneuvered the rampaging horse, holding onto his liege until the beast had calmed down.

Sweat soaked Mary's skin, and her hands trembled. When she gasped out his name, Albert tightened his embrace, eternally grateful for her safety.

A while later, Albert carried Mary to a room in the guardhouse. She must have ridden from Rose to the capital with single-minded intent. After laying her down on a cot, he had an apprentice knight prepare a light meal for her. Rizel being nearby in another room worried Albert, but right now he wanted to prioritize Mary.

"Where's Reynaldo?" she asked, still fatigued.

So she'd realized the truth. Even so, Albert couldn't halt the plan.

"Things haven't been set into motion quite yet," he replied, dodging her actual question. "First and foremost, you need to regain your strength."

According to Mary, she'd ridden her horse from Rose to the capital without stopping. Her reckless behavior frustrated Albert. One wrong step, and she could have been captured by bandits and killed permanently. Her inability to ride a horse only compounded the rashness of her actions. Albert wanted to admonish her for her carelessness, which was in stark contrast to her usual composure. However, he couldn't bring himself to utter harsh words since she still looked exhausted. And, above all else, Albert hadn't been there to stop her from acting rashly. That was the main source of his frustration.

"You're supporting Reynaldo's plan, aren't you?" Mary asked. She'd already regained her composure and posed this question as if she knew the answer.

Albert nodded. "The current king is corrupt. Purging him will benefit the people."

"I know of his corruption all too well. Maybe purging him *is* the best decision. But you and Reynaldo are planning to aggravate matters even further, correct?"

Albert held his tongue. Her words had cut to the heart of the matter.

Perhaps King Grey's retainers could have admonished him earlier and guided

him to the correct path. With Prince Rizel's cooperation, Albert and Reynaldo could have solved matters without aggravating the conflict. However, Reynaldo deliberately chose not to take this path. After all, this was yet another facet of his vengeance.

"Albert." Mary looked at him with grim determination. "Take me to Reynaldo right away."

"But..."

"Please."

As Mary's honey-colored eyes shone with intensity, déjà vu swallowed Albert. While interacting with Mary, he'd glimpsed traces of her former self, but now her eyes were identical to Rosemary's. Similarly, the strength of her words gave off a different impression than usual. Albert couldn't shake off his unease, but he also couldn't give in to Mary's request. Thus, her unyielding eyes bore into him silently.

While Albert wavered over what to do, loud voices and a booming sound came from outside the room. Alert, he unsheathed his sword and cracked open the door. No intruders appeared to have come from outside, but the chivalric order had fallen into chaos.

"Please wait here," Albert said to Mary.

Despite his skepticism, he ran towards the room where he'd locked up Prince Rizel. He'd caught Rizel off guard and imprisoned him, but the prince was an outstanding fighter whom Albert had trained since the boy's childhood. Albert knew that Rizel wouldn't remain confined so easily. Reynaldo's orders to imprison Rizel had simply been a means of buying time.

Still, this is far too soon, Albert thought as his anxiety spurred him onwards. Before long, he came to the room where Prince Rizel should have been confined. A single knight lay collapsed on the corridor floor. Rizel stood in front of the unconscious man, holding the sword he'd stolen from him. In contrast to his usual gentleness, he glared at Albert, radiating an unyielding spirit befitting a king.

This was the worst possible turn of events, but a piece of Albert's heart was

filled with pride at seeing his protégé's kingly disposition. In the end, he identified more as a knight than a man seeking vengeance.



MY senses were hazy as I rode to the capital in a frenzy. Had I arrived at my destination by some miracle, or had it been thanks to Rosemary? Either way, I felt her presence closer to me than ever before. Until today, I'd experienced her life as memories, but now she truly seemed like my other self. It was a strange sensation.

With Rosemary possessing me, I'd completed the long ride to the capital despite my lack of experience on horseback. My exhausted body longed to rest, but I set that aside. Time was of the essence. I'd asked Albert to let me see Reynaldo, but he hadn't given me a positive response.

How frustrating.

I wanted to visit the castle as soon as possible and speak with Reynaldo. While the commotion outside had died down, Albert hadn't returned. *He wouldn't abandon me, right?* I thought, getting out of bed and opening the door softly.

I hadn't visited the guard room in a while. Compared to when I worked here, a different atmosphere filled the building. The frantic sounds of running footsteps and shouted orders echoed outside the window. Conversely, the inside of the guard room was quiet. Usually, knights used this place as a rest facility and to await further orders. As such, it was normal for only a few people to be in the building. However, I couldn't sense a single person's presence, perhaps due to the uproar looming on the horizon.

After looking around the area, I confirmed my suspicions that I was alone and left the room. I jogged down a corridor while searching for Albert. Usually, I would've crossed paths with other knights, but with the guardroom empty, I had the perfect opportunity to search for someone.

A familiar voice—one that I hadn't heard for some time—reached my ears in the quiet hallway. It sounded like Prince Rizel was talking to someone. I watched from the corner of the corridor so as not to be seen.

“I knew that you and Duke Rose were contemplating revenge against my parents. Even if you succeed, that won’t solve anything. Why don’t you understand that history will simply repeat itself?”

Yes, this reproachful voice belonged to none other than Prince Rizel.

“You wouldn’t understand the sadness and anger of losing someone precious to you,” Albert argued, “for you are ignorant of the past, Prince Rizel.”

I held my breath and listened in on their conversation. It wasn’t the proper thing to do, but part of their discussion definitely concerned me—or rather, Rosemary.

“Do you know what Reynaldo and I have devoted our lives to for the past twenty years?” Smiling almost imperceptibly, Albert continued in a whisper, his tone low and lifeless. “Why, for revenge, of course. Not just against the king and queen. We want everyone involved in Rosemary’s death to suffer as she did. That included you, Prince Rizel. Did you know that one year before your birth, an innocent woman was hanged? Even if you are blameless, I still hated you with every fiber of my being.”

Though revenge was an easy word to say, neither Prince Rizel nor I could understand the full depth of its meaning. Albert’s bloodlust caused goosebumps to crawl up my skin.

“Duke Reynaldo and I often discussed our revenge until the sun set and all through the night,” Albert continued. “How would we punish our enemies? How would we kill them? We had no reason to live apart from dreaming up our vengeance.”

Neither Reynaldo nor Albert had told me about their lives following Rosemary’s death. However, neither of them knew how to live without subsisting on revenge. I understood that now. If Rosemary had been in their position, she would have done the same thing.

The pain of having someone precious stolen from you was immeasurable. Only those left behind could understand the resentment, regret, and anguish. As the one who’d died, Rosemary couldn’t fathom their pain. I couldn’t, either, as I’d lived a peaceful second life. Only Reynaldo and Albert understood their suffering over these past twenty years.

“Nevertheless, Reynaldo is trying to avenge Rosemary in a way that will most benefit the kingdom,” Albert said. “Until he exacts that vengeance, I won’t let either of you stand in our way.”

Hearing the words *either of you* startled me. Albert had sensed my presence, so I revealed myself. He looked at me directly without the slightest hint of surprise.

“Lady Mary!” Prince Rizel cried, my sudden appearance catching him off guard.

After responding to the prince with only a glance, I turned my gaze on Albert.

“I understand now,” I said. “I know how much you and Reynaldo desire vengeance. Even so...”

Rosemary, who lay dormant inside me, cried out silently. I understood her feelings all too well.

“I need both of you by my side,” I tried my best to convey Rosemary’s wish. “I don’t want either of you to be alone. Please, Albert, let me see Reynaldo.”

Yes, I had to convey Rosemary’s wish at any cost, for she and I were one. Unable to help myself, I prayed silently.



MEMORIES of my past life sprouted inside my mind. All at once, everything came back to me, as if a flower named Rosemary had bloomed within me. The trigger for regaining her memories had been a rope grazing my neck. Rosemary had laughed derisively at this, her consciousness having become a powerful force in my mind.

At first, Rosemary’s memories were *too* strong for me. It felt as though Rosemary had been reborn and was possessing my consciousness. Worse, I’d even felt as though she’d been trying to wrest control from me.

I—Mary Edigma—was Rosemary’s present self. Despite my plain face, I had gentle features that put others at ease. I was also tall and solidly built from working in the fields. I’d been blessed with a loving father, a mother who’d been kind during her lifetime, and a slovenly yet caring older brother.

After regaining Rosemary's memories, I'd thanked God for fulfilling her final wish. Though Rosemary hadn't been blessed with loving parents, mine had showered me with affection in this lifetime. If Rosemary had continued living inside me, never remembering her past and sleeping forever, she would have been happy.

Yes, existing as Mary would have been more than enough for her.

So, why had I regained Rosemary's memories after all this time? Once her consciousness had vividly awoken inside me, I'd remembered Reynaldo and Albert—my younger brother and knight. I'd wanted to tell them about my reincarnation and assure them of my happiness. They'd been my closest companions, after all.

Showing up as Mary will give them quite the shock, I'd thought with a smirk. First, I'll need to investigate their whereabouts. Will that be possible using whatever out-of-date information has arrived in the countryside?

However, seeing my father, Tobias, pulled me back to reality.

That's right. I'm Mary now, not anyone else. Rosemary exists in the past, and her life has already come to an end. The dead mustn't commune with the living.

Strangely enough, I'd been able to accept reality due to my father's smile.

Even though I was happy in the present, could Rosemary—a figment of the past—intervene in Reynaldo and Albert's present? More importantly, if I allowed my past self to control my current life, what would be the meaning behind my death and reincarnation?

Thus, Rosemary had suppressed her desires to see Reynaldo and Albert. She'd gone back to sleep, aware that I would retain her memories. Even so, she'd never expected to wake up again. Instead, she'd resolved to quietly experience life through me, as she'd done before. On an instinctive level, she'd known her sense of self would fade over time, despite this brief awakening.

Nevertheless, life often takes unexpected twists and turns. One day, I received orders from the royal family—of whom I had no fond memories—to appear in the capital. There, I'd reunited with Reynaldo and Albert, whom I'd sworn to never see again.

Upon seeing their faces, Rosemary experienced a wave of nostalgia. Yet at the same time, she'd sensed regret and bloodlust lurking beneath their smiles. If either of them acted upon their thirst for vengeance, Rosemary would need to stop them. Would she be able to do so as a powerless memory living through me? For the first time, her circumstances had frustrated her.

I'd come to understand Rosemary through her memories, for she and I were both separate and the same. Even back then, we'd been able to recognize each other, though the sensation had been a bizarre one. After her consciousness had bloomed inside my mind, Rosemary had communicated a wish.

If you would pardon my intrusion, please allow me to grant one of my unfulfilled wishes, Rosemary had thought. At the time of my death, I prayed for the happiness of someone dear to me. If there is some meaning behind your miraculous recollection of my life, it must be to grant this wish.

"My final wish is that you find happiness after this."

That had been Rosemary's final thought before dying. In the moments leading up to her execution, she'd remembered Reynaldo's smile. She'd considered him her only true family member, and thus, she'd opened her heart to him. Starved of familial affection, Rosemary had depended upon him, just as he had depended upon her.

Even if my fiancé hates me, Reynaldo loves me, Rosemary had thought. And while Father might view me as nothing more than a tool, Reynaldo cherishes me. We provide each other with affection, and I hope to always reciprocate this.

If Reynaldo had been unhappy, Rosemary had also been unhappy. She hadn't wanted their codependent relationship to last forever, but her father and fiancé's neglect—as well as the pressure of becoming queen—had caused her a great deal of grief. She hadn't known how to alleviate this heartache except by clinging to Reynaldo. If Reynaldo still lived in misery after all these years, Rosemary was to blame for nurturing their codependency.

Worst of all, Albert had become a victim of this sin as well. His participation in Reynaldo's revenge surprised Rosemary. Albert had been raised as a knight since birth, and Rosemary had watched him strive towards this goal since childhood. Him throwing his life away in the single-minded pursuit of vengeance

seemed unbelievable to her. If his mindset had changed so much, then Reynaldo must have twisted his knightly loyalty into something unrecognizable.

Rosemary also had to bear the sin of Albert's transformation. These consequences—born from her weakness—were enough to crush her ephemeral sense of self. She longed to release Reynaldo and Albert from this ghost named Rosemary. And above all else, she wished for their happiness.

Thus, I accepted Rosemary's regret and vowed to grant her wishes. Both were parts of myself after all.

* * *

THE commotion outside the window grew louder. At the same time, silence enveloped the corridor where Albert, Prince Rizel, and I stood. I stared Albert down without flinching. Though his eyes had once burned with revenge, they now wavered. My arguments must have resonated with him. Nevertheless, I hadn't entirely convinced him.

In that case, I need to push him a little harder, I thought while closing the distance between us.

"Albert," I said. "I'm begging you."

He didn't answer, rejecting me through silence.

If I abandoned Albert, entered the palace, and searched every corner for Reynaldo, I could probably find him. Still, that wasn't an option. I couldn't leave Albert—a man consumed by vengeance—as he was. The knight barring my path was yet another incarnation of Rosemary's sins.

Through Rosemary's memories, I now understood Albert's regret. Upon meeting him in this life, her experiences had also given me insight into his past self. Thus, I fixed my gaze on Albert, stifling my emotions.

"Tell me, Albert, who is this revenge for?" I asked.

Albert stared back at me suspiciously.

"Is this revenge yours?" I pressed. "Or Reynaldo's, perhaps?"

I took another step towards Albert. Even when we were close enough to touch, he stood stock still, neither rejecting me nor laying a finger on me. I

placed my palm atop his sword hand and looked up into his dark brown eyes.

“No,” I continued. “This vengeance actually belongs to Rosemary, doesn’t it?”

Albert responded with surprising calm, merely stiffening at my words. I squeezed his hand tighter, lacing my fingers between his while he still gripped the sword handle. He didn’t push me away, even after I’d touched his weapon. Thinking this a good sign, I continued.

“If you mean to execute the king and queen with this sword, shouldn’t that be my duty? Aren’t I the most appropriate person to judge Rosemary’s murderers?”

Albert seemed thoroughly perplexed. Somehow, I’d thrown him off balance, despite being a girl over ten years younger than him.

“Lady Rosemary?” he asked. “No, Mary...?”

Yes, I knew it.

When Albert looked at me before, his eyes burned with revenge. Now, he stared at me with a troubled expression—one I much preferred.

“If you two desire revenge so much, relinquish that duty to me,” I said.

With both palms, I lifted Albert’s hand and pressed it to my cheek while he still clung to his heavy sword. The blade touched my hair, less than an inch away from grazing my skin. Though my actions unnerved Albert, he protected me, gripping the sword so that it wouldn’t draw a single drop of blood.

“I could never...” Albert trailed off in a hoarse voice. Then he shouted loudly enough for his voice to echo throughout the corridor. “I could never do such a thing! I can’t allow you to bear this sin, Mary! Reynaldo and I must shoulder this vengeance alone!”

“Since Rosemary forced this vengeance upon you, why shouldn’t it be mine?!” I shouted as well, my emotions boiling over. “Do you think Rosemary would be glad to see you two avenge her?! Do you think she would look at both of you covered in blood, smile, and say thank you?! In that case...!”

In that case, had they ever truly seen Rosemary? She’d done nothing but love both of them with all her heart.

“Please, don’t make Rosemary grieve any more than you already have,” I said. “Allow me to grant her true wish.”

Albert slowly lowered his sword hand. “Mary...”

I pressed my face into Albert’s chest, tears still flowing from my eyes. Albert held me with his empty hand.

“Even so, I can’t forgive them!” he roared.

His plaintive shout echoed in my ears, and he began to weep.

How many tears did he have to hold back for my sake?

Looking up, I wiped away the rivulets running down his cheeks. I finally put into words what I’d been thinking for so long. “Well then, let’s avenge Rosemary together.”

“What...?” Albert mumbled without much thought.

Unconcerned, I continued. “Allow me to take revenge in the way Rosemary would have wanted, my dear knight.”

He considered this for a long time; I flashed Albert a brilliant smile. No matter how little Rosemary wanted revenge, the wounds of those left behind were deep. If their hatred wouldn’t abate, then I would take revenge in my own way.

Surprised, Albert grinned back at me, his tears having dried. Rosemary loved this smile of his. Whenever she’d made selfish requests of Albert, he’d always smiled and acquiesced, no matter how distressed he’d seemed.

Exactly like he was doing now.

Albert bowed his head. “As you wish...my liege.”

It was just like when we’d played knight together as children countless times.

“Allow me to exact your—or rather, Rosemary’s—revenge,” Albert said. “And allow me the duty of protecting you.”

The promise Rosemary and Albert had made to each other when playing knight returned to my mind.

“Yes, I ask that you protect me, my knight,” I said.

“As you wish,” Albert replied.

I rejoiced when Albert looked at me with his normal, dark brown eyes, the flames of vengeance gone from his glare. His return to the knight of old filled me with relief. Rosemary had always loved the color of his eyes. Albert had been her first love, but those feelings had bloomed quietly rather than extravagantly. Unable to reciprocate her knight’s feelings, she’d hidden her love inside her heart.

“A-Ahem.”

Someone cleared their throat conspicuously. After Albert and I exchanged glances, we turned in his direction.

“Would either of you mind explaining what’s going on?” Prince Rizel finally demanded after we’d ignored him for so long. The tension had drained from his features, but he still looked angry.

“Oh, um...” I trailed off. “I’m sorry, but even though I’d like to explain everything right now, I need you to take me to Reynaldo.”

“Lady Mary,” the prince responded.

“I promise to tell you everything later.”

Even if it hurt Prince Rizel, I would explain the situation to him. He deserved to know the truth. The prince picked up on my feelings. Resigned, he donned a strained smile.

“I’ll hold you to that,” he said.

“Of course,” I answered.

“Well then, I’ll take you to Duke Reynaldo.”

While I spoke with Prince Rizel, Albert woke up the knight the prince had knocked unconscious. Then, Albert looked in our direction. “Yes, please do!” he cried.

Once again, I calmed myself and nodded. I also thought about Rosemary, who slept within my heart. Would I be able to grant her wishes? With my past self on my mind, I ran after Albert.



NOT only did Tia have a dimwitted husband, but her foolish father fell right into Duke Reynaldo's trap. She didn't want to participate in the same boring games as them. Instead, she watched the coup unfold while covering her mouth with her favorite folding fan. All the while, her eyes resembled those of someone examining a board game.

Tia had never found her life as a member of the Danzes family very interesting. Her father hadn't paid much attention to his children. Meanwhile, her mother had bedecked herself in splendorous garments for social gatherings. Tia also had an older sister, who prided herself on having married into a good family. All in all, Tia hadn't found this life the least bit amusing.

Perhaps I could be happy living as Mother does, Tia had thought.

"Follow my instructions, and I'll make you the happiest girl in the world," her father had told her. Looking back, the man was quite manipulative. For a while, Tia had played his games as a pawn. By doing as he'd instructed, she'd even become queen.

Father is skilled at setting up these little games of his, Tia had thought.

Seducing the ignorant, naïve prince was most amusing. Tia had always enjoyed observing people. Playing the part of a woman who stoked men's desires had been all too easy. Though Prince Grey had been engaged to a beautiful woman named Rosemary, Tia knew how to win him over through words, gestures, and charm.

More importantly, Tia despised Rosemary. Through no struggle of her own, Rosemary had inherited beauty, status, and a variety of other enviable qualities. Tia wanted to take everything from her. Thus, she'd enjoyed setting up Rosemary more than seducing Prince Grey.

Rosemary had always admonished Tia for manipulating the prince like a piece in a board game. Rosemary even went so far as to advocate for Tia and the prince's relationship.

"If you truly love him, you should consider your position and act accordingly," she'd advised.

That hadn't been the least bit amusing. Tia wanted to see Rosemary's face twisted in frustration after losing their little game. In the end, Rosemary had lost, leading to her execution. Alas, Tia was sad to lose a toy she'd so loved playing with.

Later, she gave birth to an heir, as had been her duty. However, when Tia's dimwitted husband finally understood her, he began to glare at her with eyes full of resentment. Regardless, Grey had merely been another toy with which to pass the time.

Everything had gone according to Tia's plan, even becoming queen, and yet, she still felt unfulfilled. She had everything she'd longed for as a child, but discontent still plagued her. Other exciting games filled every corner of the palace, but none of them piqued her interest. Scores of men loved her. She had an abundance of dresses and jewels. Though Tia played in the same dazzling world as her mother, she found no enjoyment there. What had her mother found so pleasurable about this life? She'd never spent much time with the woman, so Tia had no idea.

Sometime later, her father—Count Danzes—was driven out of the palace. Someone must have set him up. In the past, he'd won his little game against Marquis Hubert, but this time he'd been defeated. When Tia's father sought her help, she rejected him. She had no particular attachment to her father, and she hadn't been foolish enough to involve herself in a game that had already been lost.

As a result, Tia found herself in a rather precarious situation. Fortunately, everything was pinned on her father, and he'd been exiled from the capital. This had rekindled Tia's excitement. Yes, her father had lost the game, but who had set him up? Who had been the victor?

Not long afterwards, a pair of familiar, jade eyes had begun glaring in her direction. Those eyes—the same color as Rosemary's—stoked the flames of her sadistic heart. The arrival of a new but familiar toy delighted Tia.

Will I finally regain a bit of excitement in my dull life? she'd wondered.

Reynaldo had almost certainly come to exact revenge on the royal family. Still, this signaled the beginning of a new game.

And what a fun game it's shaping up to be!

Tia had summoned a spy that she employed secretly, whispering instructions into his ear. Despite being queen, Tia had little political authority. Regardless, she'd played this game to the best of her abilities. Like her father, she would probably lose, but she wouldn't go down without a fight.

What would her new toy do? What kind of battle would the man behind those glaring eyes propose? In the past, Rosemary had stared Tia down as well, urging her to correct her behavior. Tia recalled the games she'd played with Rosemary, attempting to dull the luster of her eyes. How exciting would it be to also steal the glow from Reynaldo's eyes?

Tia giggled quietly, hiding her mouth behind a folding fan. After all this time, she could no longer find any pleasure except in playing games.



THE audience chamber was located in the center of the castle, at the end of a long corridor. As the largest room in the castle, it was primarily used for receiving guests and holding government meetings. Likewise, it was used for hosting parties and ceremonies. As such, it had the most elaborate design of any room in the palace. While the grandiose door depicted the royal family's long history, the radiant ornamentation displayed their prosperity.

I hadn't seen this door since Rosemary had been condemned to execution. On that day, Prince Grey judged her guilty in front of an entire audience.

"We are no longer betrothed," he'd said. "And do not think your attempted murder of Tia will go unpunished."

No matter how loudly Rosemary proclaimed her innocence, no one paid her any attention. Everyone around her in the audience chamber was her enemy. She'd hung her head and held back tears, but she'd resolved to never admit guilt for this setup.

"Mary," Albert spoke my name, concerned, placing his hand on my shoulder.

His voice brought me back to the present. My past life struck me when I stood in front of the door, but Albert pulled me back. He knew where Rosemary had been condemned. That's why he sounded so worried.

“I’m okay.” I gave Albert a small smile to reassure him. “Let’s keep going.”

Albert returned my smile, faint creases forming around the corners of his eyes. Until recently, those eyes had burned with the flames of vengeance. Now they reflected his strong will.

I looked at the door again. While we were running to the audience chamber, Albert filled me in on the details of this rebellion. For a long time, the anti-royalist faction was vocal about their desire to denounce King Grey for his crimes and corrupt political dealings. Needless to say, Reynaldo was at the center of this movement. Staying hidden and not appearing in public, he gained supporters who opposed the king. Secretly, he’d gathered evidence of the king’s corrupt leadership, which included bribes and money rendered to him—and the prime minister—for favors.

Lastly, Reynaldo had quietly gathered other nobles from various regions who opposed the king. In the end, he’d collected signatures from over half the nation’s aristocracy. After assembling all his pieces, Reynaldo traveled to the royal castle, where his forces had gathered for this ostensibly just cause.

Ultimately, King Grey would be condemned as the sole source of the kingdom’s corrupt governance. Thus, Prince Rizel wouldn’t share his punishment, and following his father’s deposal, he would become the new king. However, all this had been planned without Rizel’s knowledge.

Prince Rizel listened to this explanation in silence. One wrong step, and he might have ended up as one of the condemned. Even so, he’d remained composed. Furthermore, Reynaldo planned for Prince Rizel to come forward as another one of his father’s detractors once the coup had ended.

“That’s a great deal to ask from me,” Prince Rizel protested.

Appearing to have expected this, Albert looked at the prince, nodded, and continued, “That’s why it was necessary for me to stall you. I needed to remove you from the castle, if only temporarily.”

“And that’s why you drugged me to sleep?”

Surprised, I looked at Albert. He remained silent, not denying the accusation. In other words, he *had* drugged the prince.

“I’m prepared to receive punishment,” Albert said.

“So, you don’t think I’d depose my father to become king?” the prince asked.

“No, I don’t. A man like you would never do such a thing.”

Despite Albert’s involvement in the plan, he studied Prince Razel calmly, as a teacher might look at a student. Upon hearing this, Prince Razel went silent.

This is only a guess based on what I just heard, but...

If Prince Razel didn’t inherit the throne, it would lead to a protracted vacancy. Chaos would ensue. A prolonged disarray in the nation’s governance would have a negative effect on the kingdom and its people. Considering this, Prince Razel would probably consent to becoming king in the end, regardless of his own will. This must have been one part of Reynaldo’s plan.

“This coup is being conducted with the utmost secrecy, even by those inside the palace,” Albert explained. “The king’s personal guards are being stalled by our faction’s private soldiers, and furthermore, all the knights stationed in the palace are anti-royalists. Because of this, we started a commotion outside to serve as a distraction, but in the meantime, Reynaldo will have seized control of the audience chamber.”

As the high commander, Albert could easily arrange which knights were stationed in what location. Also, the coup had been executed the same day I’d left for the castle. If I’d been even a day late in realizing Reynaldo’s intentions, his plan would have succeeded.

I remembered what Reynaldo had said to me when he left Rose.

“Don’t disappear from my side ever again.”

When I considered how Reynaldo must have felt when proceeding with this plan, my heart ached. He must have feared my departure if I learned of the coup.

The audience chamber walls were so thick that I couldn’t hear a single voice from within. However, a tense and menacing aura leaked out from the door. I could imagine what was happening inside.

“I’m opening the door now,” Albert told us.

Both of us nodded silently. Albert opened the heavy door with nary a sound. The light of the chandelier shone down on me. I squinted, staring straight ahead.

* * *

THE king, the prime minister, and a number of nobles allied with their faction were bound with rope inside the audience chamber. Usually, they would be holding political meetings of little value here. Now, all of them looked dejected.

Reynaldo called out their names calmly and dispassionately, as if performing routine work. “Viscount Dozle, Duke Ghastia, Prime Minister Arkbelt. Baron Mizell, Viscount Franz, Viscount Ghosn.”

Behind Reynaldo, Count Oxford relayed the charges against them. Furthermore, he also announced their punishment right then and there, which usually would have been decided at a trial. Viscount Dozle would be imprisoned and stripped of his peerage. His title would be transferred to a relative of his named Viscount Lyfia. Duke Ghastia would be stripped of his peerage and exiled from the country.

The condemned shouted criticisms of their punishments, but no one listened. After a secretary checked his notes for any discrepancies, they were dragged off by the knights or private soldiers supporting the coup. Even if they struggled or wailed in protest, they were forcibly imprisoned within the castle dungeon. Reynaldo and his conspirators had decided that the condemned would face their punishments in order at a later date.

Most of the condemned had been stripped of their peerage and would have their assets seized. Even so, their punishments had been decided with the future in mind, as this coup had the potential to throw the kingdom into disarray. Reynaldo would end this matter before inviting unnecessary chaos. He’d also restrained, charged, and punished them all at once to curb dissenting opinions. Likewise, he documented everything for the sake of future political maneuvering. If anyone objected to these overly speedy trials, he could simply rewrite the dates to explain things away.

Later, relatives of the condemned would inevitably voice their dissent. Reynaldo had already thought of measures to inhibit their criticisms. Apart from

discussing worst-case scenarios with his conspirators, he'd also looked into which families would suffer most from having their peerage stripped.

It vexed Reynaldo to consider the fates of families that lived on embezzled money. However, as the mastermind behind this coup, he couldn't ignore this problem. In fact, he deserved praise for having worked out so many problems within a short period of time.

Yet, in the end, this was but one part of Reynaldo's rebellion. It had nothing to do with his deepest desire.

Call me a demon if you will, he thought, but my highest priority is revenge. No matter how drastically it destabilizes the kingdom.

"Viscount Zaire," Reynaldo called out.

You used Rosemary's handmaid in a plot to frame my elder sister for an assassination attempt. You shall pay for that crime. I will visit untold misery upon you, as your mere death would not satisfy me.

Reynaldo remembered the name of everyone who'd earned his enmity. Through this plan, he'd condemned each one that deserved vengeance. The details of their punishments even had offhand reasons to deliver harsher sentences.

Stripping them of rank and title wouldn't be enough. He considered having them flogged or dragged around by horses as well. However, if the punishments were too gruesome, it could upset the people. That could lead to his plan falling apart; Reynaldo would have to save the torture for another time.

Even so, don't think your crimes will ever be forgiven so long as you live, Reynaldo thought with a sneer. *How I long to torment you until you beg for the sweet embrace of death.*

Yet, the days Reynaldo had spent with Mary had softened his animosity.

You should all be grateful for that, he thought while calling out names.

After most of the nobles had been read their charges and punishments, only the king remained.

"I must ask you to leave the king to me," Reynaldo had requested of his

conspirators. “His punishment is the one thing I cannot relinquish to anyone else. I’ll accept any sort of responsibility afterwards.”

As the coup’s mastermind, Reynaldo had formulated this entire plan out of his unquenchable thirst for vengeance against the king. His conspirators knew this. Following a difficult conversation, they’d given their consent.

Reynaldo hadn’t spent the past twenty years crafting this plan with Albert alone. Their co-conspirators were well aware of the Ice Duke’s long-lasting hatred. He’d devoted his life to vengeance since childhood, even being willing to stain his hands with blood.

More importantly, some of the nobles participating in the coup also had personal grudges. They couldn’t disallow their ringleader from realizing his ambition. Similarly, they wouldn’t thwart his vengeance in the hopes of reforming him. In fact, the conspirators worried that if anyone opposed Reynaldo, he would charge past them, sacrificing his own life to slay the king and queen. His wrath knew no bounds, after all.

As the number of condemned in the audience chamber dwindled, Reynaldo’s co-conspirators—who’d kept their silence—turned to leave.

“Please wait,” King Grey begged in a pathetic voice, but no one heeded his words.

The door to the audience chamber slammed shut. Only Reynaldo, a handful of knights, and the king remained. The queen disappeared during the commotion, and a search party was currently tracking her down. This disappointed Reynaldo. He’d wanted to exact revenge on the couple at the same time. Even so, he didn’t mind punishing them one after another.

King Grey was bound, and a knight held a sword to the base of his throat. Unable to move, the king glared at Reynaldo. He resembled a small animal before a ferocious predator, his face pale and sweat rolling down his cheeks.

How many times had Reynaldo dreamed of this moment? Twenty years had passed since Rosemary’s death. During that period, he never stopped thinking about the scene unfolding before him. Reynaldo had lived solely for this day, and each time he’d imagined it, he’d wondered what he would say.

How does it feel to be in the same position as Rosemary?

My, how far you've fallen.

Will you cry and beg for forgiveness?

However, now that this day had arrived, no words occurred to him.

When he hesitated, Grey spoke up first.

“Are you going to kill me?” he asked.

Reynaldo stayed silent. After being asked such an obvious question, he struggled to come up with a response.

Am I going to kill you? Need I even answer?

“Is this vengeance for Rosemary?” Grey pressed.

“Don’t utter her name with your foul tongue,” Reynaldo spat back, disgusted.

Grey let out a short laugh. “So, the younger brother of a murderer is also a murderer.”

“If you’re going to insult my sister, shall I start by slicing open your mouth?”

Reynaldo knew that Grey was provoking him. Nonetheless, he drew his sword and pointed it in front of the king’s eyes.

Shall I start with his tongue?

“I only speak the truth,” Grey said. “The blood of a murderer runs through your veins, just like Rosemary’s. How revolting. Your house has done nothing but bring ruin to this kingdom!”

“How many times have I told you that Rosemary never conspired to kill anyone?!” Reynaldo bellowed.

No matter how many times Reynaldo tried to convince Grey, the foolish king never believed him. He didn’t even have the wits to consider Reynaldo’s words, for he only listened to those he already trusted. Even now, he still believed that Rosemary had attempted to murder Tia.

“Not only did Rosemary care about you more than anyone else did, but she put great effort into reforming this country,” Reynaldo continued. “Your slight

of her is a great offense. I pity you for being unable to see the truth, as I also pity my sister for being killed by the likes of you.”

“You think your sister is pitiful?” the king asked.

“Even after witnessing the full extent of the queen’s treachery, you dare ask me such a question? Her actions are the reason why you’ve never truly loved Prince Rizel, correct? Despite your blood ties being obvious to everyone else, you still doubt whether he is your own son. King of Folly indeed.”

“Silence!”

Reynaldo laughed scornfully at the dimwitted king, who so easily fell for provocations himself.

What sort of life had this king even led? He’d become a puppet who danced for the amusement of his sycophants, yet he seemed oblivious to this. In some sense, that might have been a happy existence for him.

If Rosemary hadn’t been involved with Grey, Reynaldo would never have spared him a passing thought. Even so, he *had* sworn to serve her child if she’d become queen and given birth to the next crown prince. Though he would have served her heir gladly, the one saving grace in his sister’s life might have been never marrying this foolish king.

No, that’s not true.

He’d known the depth of her fiancé’s idiocy. Reynaldo should have run away with Rosemary, even if they were young. Truth be told, he’d considered this many times when seeing his sister persecuted. He’d even voiced this idea, but as a child, he’d been unable to formulate an actual plan. Thus, Rosemary had merely thanked him for his loving concern, and the two of them had never acted.

Back then, when Rosemary was suffering, what if I hadn’t been a child? What if I’d had more experience? Or the ability to think as I can now?

The brunt of Reynaldo’s anger had always been pointed towards Grey and Tia. Yet even more so, Reynaldo couldn’t forgive the powerless child he’d once been.

Perhaps the person he most wanted vengeance on was himself.

Reynaldo had never imagined his life beyond revenge. Though he'd been considering his methods and formulating his plan for twenty years, he couldn't picture the future beyond its completion. Once he finally avenged Rosemary, he would lay down his sword, and at long last, he could drift off into peaceful slumber. Even now, he was still haunted by Rosemary's execution from time to time. Whenever he reminisced about their happy childhood, his body burned with regret. Somewhere in his heart, he longed for release from these bonds.

It won't be much longer now, Rosemary.

"King Grey Dirésias," Reynaldo said. "I shall purge you on behalf of this land's people." He reworded a line from Rosemary's favorite book.

"Hearken to my words, wicked king," Reynaldo had read aloud. "I will now punish you for the sake of our people."

"Keep reading," Rosemary had urged.

"Of course. And thus, the knight defeated the wicked king. 'Thank you, my knight,' the princess said upon being rescued. Afterwards, she married the new prince, and they both brought long-lasting peace to the kingdom. And for the rest of his days, the princess' knight protected her and her husband."

Alas, Reynaldo had neither become a prince nor a knight.

How wonderful would it be for reality to end like a picture book? he thought as he raised his sword.

A horrible scream echoed in his ears, signaling the beginning of his vengeance.

* * *

AS soon as Albert opened the door, a shriek like someone's death throes reached my ears.



I stiffened. Albert folded me in his arms, blocking the scene from my sight.

“Father!” Prince Rizel shouted.

His tense cry drew my eyes towards the front of the audience chamber. Reynaldo was the first person I saw. Fresh blood splattered all around King Grey and a few knights as they stood before him.

I rebuked my fearful heart and calmly observed the situation. While the king had been slashed with a sword, the wound didn't appear fatal. Moaning, he pressed one hand against his sliced collarbone in a desperate attempt to staunch the bleeding. All the while, a knight rested his sword at the base of the king's neck.

The one to wound the king had no doubt been Reynaldo. He turned his gaze towards the door while holding a sword stained with blood. His shadowed eyes widened with surprise upon finding me.

“Why are you here...?” he asked.

He glared at Albert. Reynaldo must have concluded that he'd summoned me back to the castle.

Still nervous, Prince Rizel tried to approach the king, but one of the knights on standby barred his path.

“I ask that you not interfere, young prince,” Reynaldo said. He pointed his sword towards Rizel, which was stained with his father's blood. “Punishing you isn't part of my plans. Would you kindly stand there and watch in silence?”

Prince Rizel held his tongue, staring at Reynaldo directly. Despite his frustrations, he knew that he had no choice but to obey. If Rizel sprang into action, Reynaldo would probably turn his blade on the prince without the slightest hesitation.

“Spare me your righteous arguments,” Reynaldo continued. “Your mother and father have committed far too many crimes for me to lend an ear. But you are wise, my prince. You know how much animosity your parents have earned, do you not?”

Reynaldo had just declared that his strong will wouldn't be swayed by

platitudes.

“And you’re here too, Lady Mary,” Reynaldo greeted me.

Compared to how he’d glared at Prince Rizel, his gaze softened when he looked at me. Even so, his eyes retained their deeply engraved resentment.

“I don’t know how you convinced Albert to bring you here,” Reynaldo said, “but please allow me to carry out my revenge.”

“You promised not to do anything that would make me sad,” I argued.

“Yes, that’s true.”

No, he hasn’t forgotten the promise we made to each other on that day.

“I also asked you to stop if you were thinking about revenge,” I reminded him.

“You did say that,” Reynaldo confirmed, gazing at me with sorrowful eyes. “That’s why I kept this rebellion hidden from you. I wanted to exact my vengeance while you were none the wiser.”

No matter how much Rosemary abhorred the idea of revenge, Reynaldo made his decision a long time ago. Vengeance had become everything to him—his very life.

How many years has he spent thinking about revenge?

After so long, he’d become the embodiment of vengeance itself. Rosemary’s wish for him to find happiness hadn’t come true. His expression as he looked at me served as irrefutable evidence.

Tears poured from my eyes. I was powerless to stop them.

No, don’t cry, Rosemary.

Her overwhelming sadness pushed me forward. I walked towards Reynaldo. Tears rolled down my cheeks; I couldn’t suppress them.

Had I ever cried so much in either of my lives? No matter how much she suffered, Rosemary always bit back her tears. As her reincarnation, the same held true for me. After being neglected by her family, Rosemary was framed for a crime she hadn’t committed. Even then, she hadn’t shed a single tear. My soul resisted crying when my beloved mother died in my second life. Yet now, I

couldn't stop bawling. With tears clouding my vision and splashing onto the floor, I approached Reynaldo.

"Mary?" he asked, looking at me with genuine surprise.

Once we were within arm's reach, I hugged him around the neck. "I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry." I repeated this apology over and over again, relaying Rosemary's words exactly as she would have done. "I've tormented you for so long, haven't I? I should never have died and left you behind. Forgive me for causing you so much pain. I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry."

I embraced Reynaldo, begging for his forgiveness. Rosemary had wanted to apologize to him for so long. If not for their codependency, this never would have happened. In the end, she'd turned him into a man who cared for nothing but revenge. However, the person he most needed vengeance on was none other than Rosemary.

"I stole both your future and your happiness," I said.

"Rosemary...?" Reynaldo asked.

"If you desire vengeance, I can accept that. But please, direct it towards me. I'm the one truly deserving of punishment."

"What are you talking about...?" Reynaldo wrapped his arms around my waist, hugging me back. "I can't allow you to suffer any punishment, Rosemary! All the blame rests on your murderers!"

"Yes, that's true. And if you desire vengeance against them, allow me to be the executioner." As tears spilled from my eyes, I brushed my cheek against Reynaldo's. "I will mete out their punishment, as I must atone for the crime of leaving you with nothing."

"Crime...?"

"My darling Reynaldo. You loved me so much. If I wanted you to be happy, I should have left you with a different future. One where you weren't forced to seek vengeance."

I stroked Reynaldo's golden hair, as Rosemary had so often done. In the past, she'd looked down when patting his head. Now, I had to look up and extend my

arm to reach his hair. The difference in height spoke to the gravity of Rosemary's sin. He'd grown so tall while plotting his vengeance.

"No matter how much we regret the past, we can never go back in time," I said. "But since I can stand in front of you right now..."

I cupped Reynaldo's face with both my hands.

You always were such a crybaby. Whenever there was a thunderstorm at night, you would ask to sleep in my bed. You also played knight with me until the very end. How I love you, my one and only family.

"...Let me make you happy," I finished.

I brought my tear-stained face close to Reynaldo's, kissing his blood-splattered cheek. Afterwards, I kissed his forehead and then his nose. I showered him with kisses, just like Rosemary had once done as a sort of good luck charm.

While I cupped Reynaldo's face, his expression crumpled, tears rolling down his cheeks. "Why...?" he choked out through sobs. "Why did you leave me behind?" Dropping his sword, Reynaldo hugged me with both arms. "I could have endured anything with you by my side! How was I supposed to live my life without you? I couldn't believe in anything. I wanted to see you again for so, so long. If you'd been by my side all these years, everything would've been okay."

Tears fell from Reynaldo's eyes, dripping onto my cheeks and mixing with my own tears.

"I wouldn't have cared about losing our status," Reynaldo sobbed. "We could have even overcome poverty together. So why did you die and leave me all alone?!"

"I'm sorry..." I apologized. "I'm so sorry, Reynaldo."

"How cruel of you. How terribly cruel of you, Rosemary. Please don't abandon me."

Words Reynaldo had wanted to convey since childhood poured forth from him. He'd probably wanted to cry like a young boy for twenty years, and finally, I was able to embrace him with all my heart.

“How cruel of you, Rosemary...” he sobbed. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Reynaldo.”

As I hugged my younger brother, who nuzzled his face against my shoulder like a clingy child, fresh tears leaked from my eyes. Perhaps Rosemary’s final wish had come true in some small way.

* * *

“**ALBERT**, meet Reynaldo—my little brother,” I said.

Not long after Reynaldo was adopted into our house, I introduced him to Albert. Since they were both boys, I’d expected them to get along, but Reynaldo clung to my skirt the whole time. My adorable little brother had grown thoroughly attached to me. Whenever we had free time, he would always follow me around.

“Say hello to Albert, Reynaldo,” I urged him.

“Hello...” he mumbled discontentedly.

At first, I thought Albert’s height had frightened him, but Reynaldo was like this with everyone.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Lord Reynaldo,” Albert replied, having learned to introduce himself as a servant. “I’m Albert McClain.”

He sounds so suave—just like a knight.

I watched the boys introduce themselves with a grin on my face. On the other hand, Reynaldo wore a bored expression while looking up at me. He really *was* cute, even with that look on his face. That being said, I liked his smile the best.

* * *

“**ROSEMARY**,” Reynaldo said to me. “I want to read this book.”

My, how unusual.

While I was with Albert in the garden, Reynaldo had brought me my favorite picture book, which was about a knight. Before, he’d claimed to be tired of this story.

“Of course,” I replied.

I stood up from the ground, where I'd been making a flower crown, and sat on the bench next to Reynaldo. Though Albert and I were supposed to have been playing together, he was just practicing his swordsmanship as usual. Upon seeing Reynaldo and me, he quit swinging his wooden practice sword.

"You're reading that book about the knight with Reynaldo as well?" he asked in an exasperated tone.

"What's the problem?" I asked. "I like it."

"Yes, I know that all too well."

I often pestered Albert to read this book with me. "No, I'm sick of it," he would always reply, but for some reason, he now seemed discontent.

"May I be the one to read?" Reynaldo asked.

"Of course," I replied.

Reynaldo hadn't learned to read in his previous home, but since arriving at the Hubert household, he'd picked up the skill in no time. Apparently, he'd also been learning foreign languages. As the future queen, I needed to follow his example.

As I opened the book with Reynaldo sitting next to me, a shadow fell over us. That made me look up.

"Weren't you training, Albert?" I asked.

"I'm suddenly in the mood to read as well," he answered with a sour expression, sitting down next to me.



Since this was a bench for two, it was a little cramped with three people. Sandwiched between the two boys made things a bit stifling, but I ignored it as they were both showing unusual interest in my favorite book.

“Usually, neither of you wants to read this story,” I said with a laugh. “Weirdos.”

Reynaldo and Albert exchanged glances, laughing as well.

I opened the book, and we began reading my favorite story.

Can I become a princess like the one in this story? I wondered. *Will my beloved knight protect me?*

Reynaldo read the book aloud, and Albert turned the pages. When Reynaldo finished, Albert read aloud next, although he expressed exasperation at my lack of boredom.

Other books are tedious and difficult to understand, I thought. *But I’ve loved this story since I was a child. It always encourages me.*

Yes, the story inspired me, but with Albert and Reynaldo reading it alongside me, I couldn’t have been a happier princess. These two would always be my knights.

The three of us spent the rest of the day together, basking in sunlight, until a servant called us in for dinner.

* * *

MY lack of desire for revenge wasn’t an act. After regaining Rosemary’s memories, Tia’s deception frustrated me. *That wasn’t worth taking my life over,* I’d lamented. Even so, I hadn’t seethed with resentment. The warmth of my new family had burned brighter. By reincarnating, I’d obtained what Rosemary had always wished for—a true family.

My past resentments had mostly faded away, but honestly, I’d still contemplated how I might punish my murderers. That being said, I’d never expected an opportunity to actually materialize.

“King Grey Dirésias,” a nearby knight said. “Your many years of misappropriating taxes and neglecting your citizens through corrupt governance

have violated imperial law. Though I will have to summarize your transgressions, your crimes are worthy of death. In the name of various feudal lords—as well as tens of thousands of Dirésias citizens—Duke Reynaldo Rose is hereby authorized to render judgment against you.”

After concluding this statement, the knight withdrew a document from his breast pocket and stepped forward. The document listed the king’s crimes at length, and at the bottom, a number of people had signed their names.

The king glared at the document while dripping sweat. He couldn’t comprehend that he was actually being punished. The blood flowing from his collarbone had slowed, but with the wound being nearly lethal, his breathing was still ragged.

“I considered hanging you, as you hanged my sister,” Reynaldo said, his icy eyes regarding the king with scorn. “However, I will entrust your punishment to one Mary Edigma—the daughter of a baron. Listen well and appreciate this blessing from the bottom of your heart.”

I almost fell over. I had almost no experience with trials, even taking my previous life into account. At most, Rosemary had experienced her own trial, and she’d never been on the judging side.

Both the king and the nearby knights were surprised. Nevertheless, I hid my bewilderment, cleared my throat lightly, and stepped forward. Since I’d been bawling until a bit ago, my eyes were bloodshot, and I lacked any trace of dignity. Regardless, I steeled my expression and stared at the king.

“I will now announce your punishment, King Grey Dirésias,” I said. “First, you will abdicate the throne and name Crown Prince Rizel as your successor. Afterwards, you will publicly apologize to the citizens of this country for all your crimes.”

His crimes warranted at least this much. Though Reynaldo also wanted to sentence King Grey to death, I chose not to say this.

“Furthermore, you will acknowledge the hanging of Rosemary Hubert, which occurred twenty years ago, to have been a mistake,” I continued. “Thus, you will retract the dishonor associated with her name, give her a proper memorial stone, and allow her to rest within the Hubert lands.”

“What...?” King Grey asked.

Looking at the man filled me with pity. Even after all these years, he still believed Rosemary to have been guilty. Most nobles at the time were aware of her innocence. For twenty years, the king had been deceived. No one bothered to tell him the truth. How terribly sad.

“King Grey,” I said. “Rosemary always badgered you with advice precisely because she feared this outcome. A country does not belong to its king. No, a country belongs to its people, and the king is simply entrusted with presiding over it.”

“How do you know what Rosemary told me...?” the king asked.

“Sadly, she is the only one who ever told you the truth.” I ignored his question.

To my knowledge, everyone else around Grey was an opportunistic flatterer. After witnessing many people attempt to win him over with empty words, Rosemary tried warning him. She’d given advice similar to mine on numerous occasions. Though Grey had found these admonishments unpleasant, Rosemary foresaw a bleak future awaiting the prince if no one helped him. When he’d ignored her, she’d hoped to entrust this role to his beloved Tia. Yet in the end, even she deceived him.

After I’d spat out what little concern Rosemary had for Grey, I looked down on him again. “When everything is over, you will be confined within the White Tower.”

Despite being used as a medical treatment and recuperation facility, the White Tower had also been built to isolate problematic members of the royal family. In other words, it was a prison for the highest-ranking members of society. Moreover, only the royal family and a small group of nobles were privy to this information.

“Why does the daughter of a baron know about the White Tower...?” Grey asked.

“You will be confined there for the rest of your life,” I responded, ignoring his question again. “But if he wishes, Prince Rizel may visit you.”

After mulling over these words for a short while, Prince Razel donned a peaceful yet bitter smile. “Thank you, Lady Mary.”

“Razel!” Grey bellowed. “Did you conspire with these traitors to set up your own father?!”

“Actually, Prince Razel—” The man in question cut me off.

“I don’t mind,” he said. “Though I didn’t expect this coup, I did think my father needed to be punished someday. The time of his sentencing has simply been hastened.”

Razel looked at his father with a placid expression. I didn’t know what sort of relationship they’d had. However, I did know that the prince had much to consider. In that case, it would be tactless of me to interrupt.

“Damn it!” Grey swore. “I didn’t do anything! The prime minister is to blame for all this!”

“That’s true, Father,” Razel answered. “You truly didn’t do *anything*.”

After approaching the king, Razel stooped down so that they were eye to eye. With their faces so close to each other, they looked identical. Not only were Razel’s eyes sapphire blue, a color unique to the royal family, but even his face resembled his father’s. How could Grey ever have doubted his son’s parentage?

“Doing nothing is a sin in itself,” Razel continued. “If the king’s job were to do nothing, even a puppet could fulfill his role. And indeed, you worked no harder than a puppet, Father.”

“You dare insult me?!”

“I only speak the truth. In an entire lifetime, you cannot learn all there is to being king. A man who shuns the pursuit of knowledge should never rule over people.”

“But I entrusted those duties to my retainers...” Grey argued weakly.

“Do you not understand how that sort of thinking led to your downfall? Open your eyes already!”

This was my first time seeing Prince Razel enraged. He was usually so mild-mannered. At this point, I couldn’t tell which one was the father.

“Even children are taught not to force their responsibilities onto others!” Prince Rizel shouted. “Have you not learned anything in your entire life?! A single one of your whims can end a person’s life or impoverish your citizens! So long as you ignore that truth, you’ll never be fit to rule! I don’t know what else to say to you, Father.”

“Rizel...”

“I regret not telling you this sooner. I kept my mouth shut because I didn’t want you to hate me. That is my sin as well. As your son, I shall also shoulder the blame.”

King Grey looked directly at Prince Rizel as his son scolded him. Somehow or another, these two had finally come to understand each other. At the end of this long road towards vengeance, a familial bond had been forged.

I found a small amount of joy in that.

* * *

***WHY** did this happen? Grey wondered, his wrists bound with rope. Did I truly do anything so terrible? Where did I go wrong? No, what did I even do wrong in the first place?*

His shoulder wound had been treated and stitched. Likewise, he’d drunk an antibiotic, but overall, his treatment had been minimal. Each time the carriage rattled, pain shot through his wound. Unfortunately, he’d fallen to such a lowly position that he couldn’t even complain. On the surface, he’d been sentenced to house arrest, but he was being treated as a heinous criminal. The knights sitting on either side of Grey had swords at their waists. Escaping would be impossible.

Where would I even escape to in the first place?

Everyone Grey relied upon had also been imprisoned. He couldn’t request help from anyone.

If any of them escaped, would they even come to my rescue?

As that occurred to him, Grey hung his head, expelling a silent laugh. He didn’t know. The retainers tasked with answering his questions at all hours of

the day were no longer by his side. When he tried thinking for himself, nothing occurred to him.

Ah, so this is what it means to be a puppet. Is this what Rizel was trying to tell me?

With the carriage windows closed, Grey didn't even know where they were headed. The White Tower—ostensibly a royal villa—stood in the middle of a distant forest. A member of the royal family who'd lived an easy, sheltered life would have no way of escaping from such a place.

As the carriage trundled along, no one spoke to Grey. Since he'd never experienced deep, solitary contemplation in the palace, it was strangely peaceful.

Come to think of it, there was always someone by my side, no matter the occasion. Handmaids, vassals, guards, and so forth.

Everyone's lives had seemed to revolve around Grey, but in actuality, they'd just been managing their puppet. No one worthy of being called *family* had been by his side. In fact, he could only recall feeling anger towards Tia.

Though Grey had spent many years in the palace, he had few vivid memories of the place. For some reason, he reminisced about when Rosemary first moved to the capital.

"I'll be living here starting today," his fiancée had said, greeting him with a beautiful curtsy. "Would you like to accompany me to the library, Prince Grey? Making time for reading is a necessity."

She'd even given him recommendations on what books to read.

"Please return to your teacher," she'd said another time. "These lessons will prove important in the future."

How did I respond to Rosemary's admonishments? Most of the time, I'd brusquely tell her off for being obstinate and annoying. Ah, but there was one time... Just one time, Rosemary and I went out together.

Grey visited the royal family's graves with Rosemary at the behest of his father, who'd advised him to spend more time with his fiancée.

I haven't even visited the royal family's graves since my father died.

White tombstones dotted an expansive field a short distance from the castle. The sky had been blue, and the wind felt pleasant. Despite being lightly garbed, Rosemary looked dignified in her black dress, which she'd worn out of respect for the dead. Similarly, Grey had changed into an outfit that resembled funeral attire. His silver hair and Rosemary's golden hair sparkled in the sunlight as the only splashes of color.

Rosemary had offered her bouquet of flowers to Grey's deceased mother and grandparents. While folding her hands in prayer, she hadn't seemed anything like the girl who pestered Grey with criticisms. Instead, she'd honored the dead in reverent silence. The sight had entranced him.

One day, will the two of us sleep together somewhere in this cemetery? he'd wondered absentmindedly.

After noticing Grey's unconscious stare, Rosemary lifted her head from prayer and met his gaze. Though Grey felt awkward about their sudden eye contact, Rosemary smiled at him without speaking.

I need to say something, Grey had thought, saying the first words that came to mind. "What were you praying for?"

Clearly, she'd been speaking to the dead, seeing as she'd been praying in a cemetery. Because Grey wasn't used to talking to Rosemary, he asked the obvious.

"I was praying for your ancestors to protect you," she'd replied. Her answer caught him off guard.

When they'd left the castle, Rosemary had been holding a bouquet of wild roses—the sort that bloomed in a vast field. At the beginning of their outing, Grey judged her as being much plainer than the other noblewomen he knew. Yet, in that moment, she appeared far more beautiful than any flower he'd ever seen.

Why did I forget about that day...? Grey thought in the present.

His former fiancée would never have conspired to kill anyone. She cared about others more than herself. When had this slipped from his mind? Twenty

years after her death, he'd mostly forgotten her features.

But, come to think of it...

Grey closed his eyes, remembering the baron's daughter who'd condemned him. She might have looked a little bit like Rosemary.

Chapter Four: A Brief Moment of Peace

“IS the food ready yet?” Stanley asked.

“How many times must I repeat myself?” I sighed. “I’m not your handmaid, Stanley.”

In contrast to my words, I placed a loaf of freshly baked bread on the table Stanley was sitting at. These sorts of everyday occurrences were identical to my time in Edigma. Unfortunately, however, we were in Stanley’s small house in the capital.

The king’s sudden abdication and the royalist faction’s condemnation had thrown the palace into turmoil. For a short while, there had been an uproar across the entire capital as well. Yet, thanks to Prince Rizel’s public speeches, Grey’s open letter of apology, and the anti-royalist faction’s skillful maneuvering, the chaos had been mostly subdued. At the same time, Rizel’s coronation needed to happen as soon as possible. Thus, the castle was incredibly hectic with preparations.

The other nobles had practically forced Reynaldo into becoming the next prime minister to support Rizel. Unable to object, Reynaldo was now working overtime at the castle. According to the man himself, he would rather return to Rose with me by his side, but Albert shot that down immediately.

As high commander of the chivalric order, Albert was also working himself to the bone. In addition to dealing with organizational changes, he needed to be doubly wary of surrounding countries. If an enemy took advantage of the chaos and more problems arose, it would already be too late. Furthermore, there had been supporters of Grey within the chivalric order. Any sons of royalists had been placed on temporary standby, resulting in an overall shortage of personnel.

“I don’t mind Rosemary’s acquittal being postponed,” I’d told Reynaldo. “What with the chivalric order and the palace being so busy.”

Though he'd seemed dissatisfied with this, I wasn't in a hurry. Likewise, I would feel guilty adding to his workload during such a hectic period.

As for me, I was on a temporary break until everything calmed down. Nevertheless, I was still assisting Albert occasionally; otherwise I'd feel like a layabout. At this point, he was even bringing paperwork back home. As someone who despised administrative duties, he lamented the sheer volume of work ahead of him. Dark circles were forming under his eyes.

"I want you to return to being a handmaid for the knights as soon as possible," Albert had told me.

Similar to Albert's earlier objection, Reynaldo had immediately shot this down.

Personally, I'd expected to return to my home region, just like the other women who'd been summoned for the fiancée selection. However, both Albert and Reynaldo had prevented me from leaving. As a result, I'd ended up staying with my brother, who worked in the palace.

In any case, the uproarious fiancée selection had been canceled, and the women had been ordered to return home. Nicky and I had said our goodbyes during her departure, promising to exchange letters. Upon returning home, she planned on telling her parents about her engagement to her boyfriend.

The next time we see each other might be at her wedding ceremony.

While seeing off Nicky's carriage, I'd looked forward to our future reunion, when she'd probably be a bride.

And so, I'd gone on leave from my handmaid duties. Now I had too much time on my hands, but I'd never expected to find myself working for my brother. Compared to the high pay and benefits of my last job, I was practically working for free now. Either way, I was happy to be staying in the capital.

Reynaldo and Alberto also made time to visit me. At first, hosting men of such high stations caused Stanley to wilt. Yet, due to his shameless nature, he'd grown accustomed to their presence after repeated visits.

Palace life is going to eat Stanley alive, isn't it?

Worried, I'd asked Albert and Reynaldo about my brother's attitude, but neither of them took offense at his behavior. For some reason, they even spoke to Stanley as a superior sometimes—a habit I'd urged them to correct. My brother wasn't worthy of such respect. In fact, what he needed was a good kick.

That aside, I was currently making dinner for Albert and Reynaldo's visit tonight. Though my meals were plebeian fare, I still enjoyed cooking for them, as they ate everything with relish. Tonight's menu consisted of vegetable stew, freshly baked bread, and meuniere made with the capital's seasonal fish. The cheap white wine I'd set out for this occasion had a refreshing flavor despite its strong acidity.

I drank water while observing Reynaldo and Albert. Reynaldo held his liquor surprisingly well, but Albert was a lightweight. His face turned red almost immediately.

"I'm reminded again of how delicious your cooking is," Reynaldo said to me. "I'm no longer satisfied with the meals at the castle."

"Agreed," Albert chimed in. "You should give cooking lessons to the palace chefs."

I'd grown used to these compliments, which would have sounded like empty flattery coming from anyone else. At first they'd mortified me, but after hearing them so often, I'd grown inured to them.

"I cooked a variety of dishes back home," I explained. "My father is something of a gourmet, after all."

"He must have refined taste," Reynaldo said with a grin. "I would love to meet him."

Recently, I'd begun to realize what Reynaldo wanted from me. Thus, I simply smiled and changed the subject.

"How is Prince Rizel doing, by the way?" I asked.

I hadn't seen the future king since his father's condemnation. Presumably, he was busier than anyone else. From what I'd heard, his retainers were concerned about his health due to him overworking.

“Ah, yes,” Albert answered, his face red. “Though his breaks are few and far between, he’s still getting the proper amount of rest. Inevitably, things are going to be busy for a while, but once the coronation is over, he should be able to take a short break. Speaking of which, he asked me to send you his regards.”

“Thank you for telling me,” I said. “I hope he doesn’t ruin his health.”

I should send him a letter when the time is right.

As I considered this, the front door opened. Stanley had probably come home.

“I’m back,” he called out. “Oh, Duke Rose and Sir Albert. Nice to see you two again.”

Is that the most reverence you can muster, Stanley?

“Pardon the intrusion,” Reynaldo said.

“Yes, pardon the intrusion, Lord Edigma,” Albert added.

After taking off his cloak, Stanley flung it over the back of his chair. I rolled my eyes, stood up, and grabbed the garment.

“This is for you, Mary.” Stanley handed me a letter as I hung his cloak on the wall.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“It’s from Prince Rizel,” Stanley replied. “How on earth did the daughter of a countryside baron become friends with a duke, the high commander, and the prince?”

Despite coming from someone far above our station, the letter had gotten crumpled inside Stanley’s pocket. I would never understand him. At any rate, I took the letter, but when Reynaldo and Albert paused their meals to look at me with concern, I excused myself from the table. I then headed to my current bedroom, which was one of the few rooms in Stanley’s house.

Prince Rizel used this same style of envelope when sending me letters previously. I took out a letter opener from the drawer and opened it. A piece of stationery was inside. When I unfolded it, my name was written in neat handwriting at the top.

The letter began with a formal greeting. As I read further, I grew worried. Would he ask me about the events in the audience chamber? I still hadn't told him about being Rosemary's reincarnation. After witnessing my conversation with Reynaldo, someone as clever as Prince Rizel probably had an inkling about my identity. Even so, I hadn't been able to discuss it with him since he'd been so busy since the king's condemnation. Back then, he'd asked me to explain things. If he inquired about the matter in this letter, I would have to consider telling him the truth.

"Huh?" I mumbled to myself.

According to the letter, I didn't need to explain myself.

"You are clearly dealing with a difficult set of circumstances," Prince Rizel wrote. "Therefore, I won't force you to tell me anything. Please keep your secrets tucked away in your heart. I won't ask the truth from you again."

At the end, he wrote a formal farewell.

"I will fulfill my role as king so that you may live a life free of worry. Please be well. I pray for your safety from the bottom of my heart."

When I finished reading Prince Rizel's letter, I let out a deep breath. He hadn't referenced his affections for me at all. What did this mean, exactly?

I can more or less sense what he's trying to convey.

He hadn't even written, "I send this to you along with my feelings." Up until now, he'd always included these mortifying words at the end. In other words, he would no longer be pursuing me.

"Thank you very much... Prince Rizel."

Saying thanks to a letter might have been comical, but I felt compelled to say them aloud. In all likelihood, I would never receive another letter from the prince.



FOR the first time, Rizel had fallen in love. And along with it came jealousy, which drew out a new side of himself. Finally, he'd experienced his first unrequited love. Since then, he tried to mend his broken heart by staying busy

each day.

Thankfully, preparations for his coronation ate up a frightening amount of time. Work poured in without a moment's rest. Currently, the palace had almost no organizational structure. However, with help from Reynaldo and other nobles, they were just managing to keep the government afloat.

All-nighters had become Razel's daily routine. Each time he saw Reynaldo going home for the evening, his nearly mended heart broke all over again. Even now, the vibrant form of his beloved occupied his every thought. His days with Mary had been short, but he remembered every wonderful thing about her. Likewise, he couldn't forget what a splendid queen she would have been.

When condemning the king, she'd also quelled the wrath of Reynaldo and Albert, both of whom had been hellbent on revenge. Only the late Rosemary could have acted as she did. The implications had been obvious to Razel. Which also doomed his love to go forever unrequited.

No wonder she was so resistant to becoming the crown prince's fiancée.

Only one woman had ever called Reynaldo *little brother* and named Albert her knight. To this day, those two men still cherished her. If Mary was who Razel suspected, his feelings would only cause her distress.

If my assumptions are correct, I'm the son of those who led Mary to the gallows.

Razel withdrew one of Mary's letters from his breast pocket. He'd read it countless times, memorizing every word. Ever since Mary had left the palace to work as a handmaid for the Rose duchy, Razel had continuously sent her letters.

They must have annoyed her, but even so, she always wrote back.

Mary had never written a single word about Razel's feelings bothering her. Regardless, she expressed her lack of interest in becoming queen. Razel had assumed her to be reluctant, but she'd actually been fearful. That made perfect sense. Razel himself didn't intend to become king out of personal desire. As a child, he'd admired sword-wielding knights far more than monarchs.

If I were a normal man and Mary and I had met under different circumstances, how might things have changed?

Rizel laughed at himself for imagining such an impossible scenario. His position—both a source of pride and a duty—had been assigned to him at birth. He had no expectations of ever being anything other than royalty. He would only lose this position if the people deemed him unnecessary, as they'd done to his father. Thinking about meeting Mary under any other circumstances was a waste of time.

And yet, I still find myself considering it. What if there had been a future for the two of us? What if we had met as two ordinary people, our pasts and positions be damned?

He hadn't developed feelings for Mary due to his position. It wasn't infatuation, either. No, he simply adored Mary as her own person. After Rizel had fallen in love with her at first sight, each word she'd spoken to him had left an impression on his heart.

Though Rizel hadn't been too familiar with how Mary spoke or smiled, he'd been drawn to the strength of her soul. Did this mean he'd fallen in love with Rosemary as well? Regardless, he cherished Mary as herself. He hadn't developed these feelings *because* she was Rosemary.

"Could the two of you say the same thing?" Rizel asked in a whisper.

His rivals in love were also the two men he respected most in the world. Over two decades, their desire for revenge might have faded somewhat, but their love for Rosemary never wavered. Rizel didn't know if their feelings had been born from loyalty, familial love, or something more. However, as a man who cherished Mary as an individual, he would ask them who they truly loved: Mary or Rosemary?

Rizel squeezed his eyes shut momentarily. This would be the last time he thought about Mary today. He only had a small break from his exhausting work. Using those precious minutes in an attempt to move on was difficult. He had a million different things to do, and a mountain of paperwork had piled atop his office desk. Furthermore, he didn't even know his mother's current location. She'd probably fled from the capital.

Though Rizel's first crush hadn't borne fruit, he didn't regret the experience, for he'd never felt such passion in his entire life. By meeting Mary, he came to

understand love. He'd also learned another hard truth—not everything he wished for would come true. Rizel internalized this life experience and used it to grow.

“Thank you, Mary,” he muttered to himself. “I’m honored to have met you.”

He then looked out his office window. The woman he loved lived as a citizen somewhere in this vast country. He wished for her to find peace. If he could repay her in some way, it would be by leading their country towards a brighter future. That would afford her a more peaceful life. As the future king, Rizel was the only one capable of this. As such, his fondness for his position grew.

When a knock came at Rizel’s office door, he turned towards the sound, giving the person permission to enter. Several dukes had visited with more official documents, requesting his presence in the hall. Rizel’s break had come to an end. Taking up his role as leader of the nation, he left his office alongside his visitors.



“**WHAT** do you think he wrote?” Reynaldo asked.

Albert stopped drinking his water and turned his gaze in Reynaldo’s direction. “The prince will probably stop expressing his feelings to Mary.”

Reynaldo flicked his wine glass in irritation, producing a ringing sound. Though Albert had similar concerns about the matter, he merely drained his water rather than voicing his agreement.

Albert glimpsed Prince Rizel at the castle from time to time. Though he still lacked refinement, learning the truth about his father and other matters had changed him. He lost his naiveté and had become a young man with a strong will to rule.

“I wish to regain your trust, which you’ve lost due to my father,” Prince Rizel had announced to his citizens.

Even before Grey’s abdication, Rizel had garnered high expectations from the people as the next king. However, rumors had spread about him participating in the coup, intensifying the sentiment. Rizel himself had used this half-truth to win the hearts of the people and the aristocracy. The kingdom’s stability had

been upended, but if they weathered this storm, the nation would probably enjoy a season of peaceful growth.

The next problem to emerge was Prince Rizel's marriage status. With the situation being so dire, many nobles wanted to hasten his betrothal.

"Our top priority should be regaining the people's trust," the prince had said, refusing them outright. "Producing an heir would be meaningless without a rock-solid system in place. As such, I would like all the young ladies in the palace to return home."

No one had opposed Prince Rizel on this issue; they all sensed his steadfast will. Even the nobles who'd fought tooth and nail to marry their daughters into royalty fell in line.

Whenever Albert watched Rizel from the corners of meetings, it seemed as though the prince had moved on from the past. In his own way, he'd accepted the current situation.

"With Prince Rizel out of the picture, either you or I will be the one to claim Mary for ourselves, it would seem," Reynaldo said.

Albert fell into an even deeper silence.

Though he'd begun sobering up, he would have preferred not to have this conversation while tipsy. Unfortunately, Reynaldo always spoke his mind after a few drinks. Either way, Albert had witnessed Reynaldo's possessiveness towards Mary firsthand. He'd even sheltered her in Rose Manor while exacting his revenge. But his desire to lock her away had tainted this noble pretense of protection.

"Am I wrong?" Reynaldo teased, his face full of mischief.

Ever since Mary had freed him from vengeance, Reynaldo had begun wearing never-before-seen expressions.

"No, you're not wrong," Albert replied.

In contrast, Albert had retained his solemn personality even after Mary had freed him. This was an unchangeable part of his nature.

"I appreciate your honesty." Reynaldo continued to drink his wine in high

spirits.

Albert glared at him. After breaking free from the curse of vengeance, Reynaldo had returned to his former self. In fulfilling his life's goal, his heart had grown much lighter. Since Albert had broken free of the same curse, he'd gained the courage to clearly state his feelings for Mary, as he'd done just now.

Reynaldo was so handsome that even a fake smile from him would draw the gazes of noblewomen. Albert was inferior to Reynaldo in every way, including their court positions. At thirty-six, he was even four years older than Reynaldo. This made him a poor match for Mary, who hadn't even turned twenty yet.

Yet even so...

"I have no intention of giving up," Albert said.

He'd given up once before. He didn't want to relive that regret. As Albert gazed at Reynaldo steadily with his dark brown, almond eyes, the latter smirked at him. Another one of the Ice Duke's new expressions.

"I'll have to reward you for making such a bold statement," Reynaldo said.

He grinned, reminding Albert of the beautiful boy Reynaldo had once been.

"A reward?" Albert repeated. "What do you mean?"

Reynaldo slid a letter over to Albert. While reading it, Albert went rigid.

"Per royal decree, you are being granted a portion of the Hubert lands and the title of viscount for services rendered during the coup," Reynaldo explained. "Your conferment ceremony will take place when everything settles down after Prince Rizel's coronation. Thus, the prince granted me permission to give this letter to you now."

"What does all this mean...?" Albert asked.

"As another man who loves Mary, I wanted us to be on somewhat equal footing. I asked the prince to return Hubert to me in order to erect Rosemary's memorial stone. Those lands were stolen from us when our father lost his standing, remember? However, as the Duke of Rose, I can't govern Hubert as well. And I'd rather not give the land to my older brother. He never valued Rosemary, after all. So, I'm giving this territory to you. Take good care of the

place—it's our precious homeland."

Tense, Albert stared at the letter. The future king even signed his name at the end.

At that moment, Mary returned, presumably after reading her own letter from Rizel. "What's going on?" she asked.

It took a long time for Albert to unfreeze and return to reality.

Bonus Story: Rosemary's First Kiss?

“**MARY**, do you remember when you first blessed me with a kiss?” Reynaldo asked.

One peaceful evening, the three of us—Reynaldo, Albert, and myself—were sitting around the dinner table. In the midst of our usual routine, Reynaldo suddenly dropped this bombshell on us. The bread I'd just taken a bite of fell onto the table in a most unladylike manner. At the same time, Albert's knife slipped from his hand and clattered against his plate.

“Why are you bringing this up all of a sudden?!” I cried.

“I thought we might discuss the past,” Reynaldo answered. “Since the three of us are back together and having dinner, we should spend the evening reminiscing over wine.”

Despite his high-spirited tone, he seemed to be enjoying Albert's and my reactions more than the wine.

“Is this talk of a kiss true, Mary?” Albert asked.

“Hmm...” I mused. “Let me think about that.”

Thankfully, I had no memories of ever *blessing* anyone. However, I'd routinely kissed Reynaldo good morning and goodnight. On the cheek or forehead, of course. From what I could tell, he wasn't talking about that sort of greeting.

Still, how would a man feel about his first real kiss coming from his sister? If Stanley had brought up this sort of conversation, it would have been to spite me. However, Reynaldo couldn't have been more different than Stanley. In fact, he'd brought up this conversation with a huge grin on his face.

“Do you remember giving me a present to celebrate my fifth birthday?” Reynaldo asked.

After thinking back for a while, I nodded. It had been Reynaldo's first birthday after moving into the Hubert household. Rosemary hadn't been able to host a

large party due to her mother's presence. Thus, she'd celebrated with Reynaldo in her favorite garden, having asked a handmaid to prepare a meal and cake for two.

"As I recall, you gave me the first handkerchief you ever embroidered as a gift," Reynaldo said.

I smiled at that. "Oh, you remembered."

Reynaldo's eyes sparkled, his expression identical to the boy he'd once been.

"Your needlework was so precise that it hardly seemed like your first attempt," Reynaldo said. "You embroidered my initials into the handkerchief, remember? Even after all these years, I still keep it safely stored away."

"Wait, you still have that old thing?" I asked.

That seemed excessive. Reynaldo had said this as if stating the obvious, but that handkerchief was over twenty years old now.

"In part, I kept the handkerchief because Rosemary gave it to me, but it was also my first ever birthday present," Reynaldo explained. "It holds deep sentimental value for me."

Up until then, neither his real mother nor Marquis Hubert had ever given him a gift. Moreover, he'd revealed this information so matter-of-factly. I found it heartbreaking, but Reynaldo spoke of Rosemary's gift with pure joy. Not even Rosemary had known how much that handkerchief had meant to him.

In response to my sorrowful gaze, Reynaldo donned a strained smile. "Please don't worry yourself over this matter. At that point, I didn't even know about the custom of receiving presents on one's birthday. Thus, I was overjoyed when Rosemary gave me a gift. As an additional request, I even asked for a kiss, to which she obliged."

Yes, that's right.

Even if this had taken place in my past life, it still made me blush. But honestly, there was no need to be embarrassed, as it had simply been like us playing house.

As Reynaldo and I fondly reminisced about our time as siblings, Albert

dropped another bombshell.

“Rosemary once kissed me as well, you know.”

“...Huh?” Reynaldo and I spoke in unison.

Albert drank his wine, unconcerned by our reactions. “Rosemary probably wouldn’t remember, though.”

“When was this?” Reynaldo asked, his tone dripping with murderous intent.

“Oh, it was at her debutante,” Albert replied.

Based on his nonchalance, he was likely telling the truth. To find out for myself, I probed Rosemary’s memories even deeper.

Debutante... Rosemary’s debutante.

So far as I could remember, Rosemary had asked Prince Grey to escort her, but since he came down with a fever on that day, Albert accompanied her instead.

“What were you doing at that time, Reynaldo?” I asked.

“I was at boarding school,” he answered.

Reynaldo’s sulky expression looked exactly as it had when he was ten years old. “I want to be your escort!” he’d shouted back then. However, only people fourteen years of age and older could enter the ballroom, so he wouldn’t have been allowed inside.

Rosemary had attended her debutante at the early age of fourteen, since the royal family wanted to announce her engagement to Prince Grey as soon as possible. She’d mastered ladylike etiquette by that time, so presenting herself at the youngest possible age hadn’t been any trouble.

Or at least, I don’t think it was.

A doubt appeared in my mind. Though I couldn’t recall the details, it felt as though something outrageous might have occurred.

“You don’t remember, do you?” Albert asked, his eyes fixed on me.

Yes, Rosemary had committed some sort of unspeakable act. If it had been my current self, I would have understood, but the flawless Rosemary?

Unthinkable.

“How strange,” I said. “I can’t remember what happened at all.”

I bowed my head slightly in apology because I couldn’t remember. To be honest, I wanted to know the answer as well. When *had* Rosemary kissed Albert, exactly?

Before the debutante, when Rosemary still entertained faint hopes for love, she briefly harbored affections for Albert. Yet, as someone who’d been betrothed since childhood, she’d discarded these feelings. They’d been a fleeting, adolescent dream.

But did she actually give into reckless abandon and do something outrageous at one point?

As I looked at Albert uneasily, Reynaldo glared at him with displeasure.

“Unfortunately, this isn’t the beautiful sort of memory that you two might be imagining.” Albert smiled at us. “Do you still want to hear the story?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“By all means, tell us,” Reynaldo agreed.

In response to our prompt answers, Albert drained his last few sips of wine.

“Rosemary presented herself beautifully at the debutante,” he said. “But after talking to a great many people, she grew thirsty, grabbed a nearby glass, and drained its contents. The drink turned out to be strong alcohol. Since Rosemary had never drunk before, she immediately grew sick. Do you remember anything up to this point?”

“Not at all,” I said.

I’d never heard this story before. When I tried to recall the second half of the debutante, Rosemary’s memories did seem fuzzy.

“Of course, even a sudden illness couldn’t prevent Rosemary from acting like the perfect lady,” Albert continued. “She feigned composure and left the venue so as not to worry anyone. Yet, once inside the carriage, she couldn’t hide it any longer.”

“Then what?” Reynaldo’s eyes flashed dangerously.

“Rosemary asked for water, but since she was having a difficult time drinking herself, I let it flow from my lips into hers.”

The story wasn’t about me precisely. Nevertheless, I still turned as red as a tomato. If there had been a decent-sized rock around, I would have crawled under it.

“Um...” I mumbled. “I know this is late in coming, but I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m at fault for letting you out of my sight,” Albert replied.

“Exactly,” Reynaldo agreed, his voice laced with irritation. “If I had been there, nothing of the sort would have occurred.”

“I suppose so,” Albert allowed. “If a young noblewoman had been taking care of a ten-year-old boy during her debutante, that probably wouldn’t have occurred.”

Bringing up their age difference was a little mean-spirited on Albert’s part.

Still...

With Prince Grey ignoring her, Rosemary had given up on love. Yet, even so, something that adorable had still happened to her. I couldn’t help but smile.

“Incidentally, may I ask who you shared your first kiss with, Mary?” Reynaldo inquired.

“Huh?” I responded.

“I would love to hear that, too,” Albert chimed in. “Please tell us.”

How many bombshells are these two going to drop on me today?

As Albert and Reynaldo both stared at me expectantly, I went to grab another bottle of wine, hoping to avoid their piercing gazes. Alas, Albert blocked my escape route.

“Oh, if you’re looking for more wine, I have another bottle right here,” he said.

“We still have plenty of time tonight,” Reynaldo added. “So, who was your first kiss? Was it your childhood friend, Risye? Master Stanley? Or your father,

perhaps?”

“I don’t remember!” I cried. “I didn’t grow up in a high-ranking house like Rosemary! We didn’t place so much importance on little things like kisses!”

And anyway, my life was busy enough as it was, I wanted to continue. I didn’t have time to think about sweet things like kisses.

When the temperature of the room suddenly dropped, I looked up to find the Ice Duke and my impassive knight staring back at me.

“Reynaldo?” I asked. “Oh, is something bothering you too, Albert?”

Had something gone wrong? Or had I done something rude? The atmosphere hadn’t exactly been peaceful, but until just seconds ago, we’d been enjoying a lively conversation about nothing in particular.

“Mary,” Albert said in a businesslike voice.

Reflexively, I straightened my posture. “Y-Yes?!”

“You might find what I’m about to ask unpleasant. All the same, I would appreciate an answer. It’s an important matter.”

“An important matter?” I repeated.

“Yes, this matter is of the highest import,” Albert confirmed, his expression serious.

I nodded, gulping down my nervousness. How large a problem had I caused? My heart pounded with anxiety as I waited for his next words.

“Have you, um...” Albert trailed off, struggling to speak.

I looked towards Reynaldo, my pulse racing even faster. He simply looked back at me, his face not so much as twitching.

“Um...” Albert mumbled.

As he beat around the bush, I waited for him to speak his mind.

Yep, just sitting here waiting...

While Albert looked uncharacteristically serious, I waited for what seemed like an eternity.

Impatient himself, Reynaldo finally spoke up. "Albert wants to know about your history of relationships with men."

My, how anticlimactic.

I looked to Albert for confirmation. The high commander of the chivalric order stared back at me, his face bright red. Apparently, Reynaldo had been correct.

"I've never been in a romantic relationship," I answered.

Wait, have I been asked this question before, or am I just imagining things?

"In that case, there's another question I'd like to ask you," Albert said.

Huh, another one?!

"Who did you share your first kiss with?" Albert asked.

Did we just come full circle?!

With this conversation having come up twice now, I couldn't avoid giving an answer. Concentrating, I thought back on my current life. While Rosemary's memories concerning first kisses had been vague, mine were even hazier.

Reynaldo and Albert watched me in agonizing silence. *Who was my first kiss?* I wondered. *I need to remember right now.* Sadly, however, no such memories occurred to me.

"I've never kissed anyone..." I mumbled.

The sudden chill from earlier dissipated, and the peaceful atmosphere returned.

"Ah, I see," Albert said.

"How very chaste of you," Reynaldo added.

As they offered me their kindest smiles, I quashed the urge to run away.

How pathetic, I wanted to sulk. These sorts of frivolous conversations are so common among girls my age, and I can't even participate in them.

"Mary," Stanley interrupted, heralding the final bombshell of the evening. "Didn't you give your first kiss to the winner of the harvest festival?"

It surprised me when he joined the conversation, as he'd been dozing on the

couch until a moment ago.

Wait a minute. How long has he been listening to us?

I panicked, worried that he might have overheard us discussing Rosemary. Even more pressingly, Albert and Reynaldo were radiating that chilling aura again. Thus, I had no choice but to swallow my words.

“What’s this harvest festival you speak of?” the Ice Duke inquired.

The high commander turned up the pressure. “And what manner of ruffian did she kiss?”

I didn’t remember it myself, so I could only stand there and try not to faint. Sensing that I had no answers for them, Albert and Reynaldo began grilling Stanley instead.

“As a reward for producing the most bountiful harvest in Edigma that year—” Stanley paused for dramatic effect. “—she kissed Old Man Veed on the *cheek*.”

Reynaldo, Albert, and I went simultaneously slack-jawed. “Old Man Veed?” we all repeated in unison.

* * *

I dreamed about Rosemary’s life that night, perhaps due to our conversation. My first dream was about young Rosemary and Reynaldo.

“Happy birthday,” Rosemary said.

She then gave him two presents. The first was an embroidered handkerchief, which she’d gift-wrapped. The second was a bouquet of flowers she’d picked from the garden. Rosemary had thought these particular flowers would suit him. Unable to understand what had just occurred, Reynaldo sat there open-mouthed, his cheeks turning a light shade of crimson.

It was his fifth birthday.

“Thank you very much...” he murmured.

The full bouquet of flowers looked so adorable in his tiny hand. With his free hand, he opened the wrapping paper of his other gift, unfolding a slightly crumpled handkerchief.

“I did the embroidery,” Rosemary explained.

“It’s my name, isn’t it?”

“Yes, those are the initials for Reynaldo Hubert.”

When Reynaldo first arrived in the Hubert region, he couldn’t read or write. His real mother had never provided him with the proper learning environment. Since arriving in Hubert, however, he’d absorbed knowledge like a sponge. Half a year had passed since Reynaldo had become Marquis Hubert’s second son. In that time, he’d become almost perfectly literate. At the same time, he’d never signed or initialed his own name on anything. As such, Rosemary’s embroidered handkerchief must have felt rather novel to him.

“If you’d like, I could give you something with embroidery on all your birthdays,” Rosemary suggested. “Surely, I’ll be much more proficient by next year.”

The shoddy embroidery her younger brother was holding embarrassed her. Thus, she offered this as soon as it occurred to her. Reynaldo nodded, his face breaking into a grin. Rosemary wanted to celebrate his birthday for years to come, and as he grew older, she would sew something worthy of him. This would also serve as motivation for her to improve her skills.

“Is there anything else you want?” Rosemary asked.

She wanted to do something more for her younger brother, seeing as he didn’t lead the most comfortable life in the manor. For a moment, Reynaldo went silent, but then he appeared to have thought of something.

“I’d like a kiss as well,” he said.

“A kiss?” Rosemary repeated.

That was quite a precocious thing to ask for. Though Rosemary was embarrassed, Reynaldo wore a serious expression.

“I want you to kiss me like the scene in your picture book,” he said.

He was talking about the picture book in which a knight saved a princess, and afterwards, she married a prince.

Come to think of it, the prince and princess do kiss at the end of the story.

Of course, the illustrations were all quite adorable.

“But that kiss was for their wedding, remember?” I asked. “They were getting married.”

“That’s okay. I want to marry you, too.”

Reynaldo is hardly ever selfish, Rosemary thought. If this is his one and only birthday wish, then...

After thinking it over, she nodded. “Well then, let’s get married.”

This would merely be playing pretend. Not only was Reynaldo her younger brother, but she was already engaged to Prince Grey. All that aside, she turned to face Reynaldo, holding the bouquet of flowers along with him.

“Reynaldo Hubert, do you promise to marry Rosemary?” she asked, reciting a half-remembered vow from wedding ceremonies.

Reynaldo stared back at Rosemary, not comprehending what she’d just said.

“You’re supposed to say *I do*,” Rosemary prodded.

“I do,” Reynaldo answered, following her instructions.

“Umm, Rosemary Hubert. Do you promise to marry Reynaldo? Yes, I do.”

How comical, Rosemary thought with a snicker. Has a bride ever conducted her own wedding ceremony?

“Well then, you may now seal your vows with a kiss,” she finished.

Rosemary pecked Reynaldo on the lips. Thus, she’d given her first kiss to her adorable younger brother. Though Reynaldo had asked for this gift himself, he seemed unaware of its significance. Rather, he simply looked happy.

“Does this mean we’ll be together forever?” Reynaldo asked.

“Yes,” Rosemary answered. “Once you’re married, you stay together for the rest of your lives.”

“That sounds wonderful. Thank you so much, Rosemary.”

At that moment, Rosemary finally understood how much Reynaldo treasured their relationship.

“It is wonderful,” she agreed. “We’ll be together forever.”

Still, we’re just playing house.

Someday, Rosemary and Prince Grey would have a wedding ceremony at the palace. When that time came, Reynaldo would understand.

But until then... At least until then, I pray that I may remain by my beloved younger brother’s side.

* * *

WHILE I dreamed, a single tear rolled down my cheek. Rosemary had broken this promise at the age of sixteen. Though her vow might have originated from playing house, she’d truly wanted to stay by Reynaldo’s side for as long as possible.

As my consciousness watched Rosemary’s memories from afar, the world shifted. My next dream transformed into Rosemary’s debutante. She’d prepared a dress worthy of the prince’s fiancée several months ago, the garment matching Prince Grey’s silver hair. She was waiting for him to arrive at the Hubert manor in the royal capital. However, she’d begun to worry. Hours had passed without him showing up.

After turning fourteen, Rosemary began living in her family’s capital residence. Once a month, she spent time with the prince, and every so often, the king invited her to study with his son. Unfortunately, Prince Grey hardly ever joined her. He hated schooling. In fact, he appeared to detest Rosemary as well for badgering him.

In spite of this, the prince promised to escort Rosemary to her debutante. This would be her first time attending such an event. “This is an important day,” her father, Marquis Hubert, had warned her repeatedly. “You cannot make any mistakes.” The day of the debutante had arrived, but Prince Grey still hadn’t shown up. Despite being restless and uneasy, Rosemary somehow maintained her composure while waiting.

Finally, a messenger from the castle arrived.

“The prince has come down with a fever and cannot attend the debutante,” he informed her.

These words crushed the momentary relief Rosemary had felt upon seeing him.

Going to one's first debutante without an escort was disgraceful. Rosemary squeezed her hands into fists in order to stop their incessant trembling, but she couldn't relax. She needed to attend this debutante, regardless of the embarrassment it would cause her, as non-attendance would be the greatest shame of all. Furthermore, the royal family had instructed Rosemary to present herself as soon as possible. If she missed tonight's event, she would have to wait for the next one. That would be too late.

"...I'm going," Rosemary said.

Resolved, she stood up from her chair. As she did so, Albert—who was planning on attending the debutante as well—called out to her. "Please wait."

Previously, he'd insisted on accompanying Rosemary as her guard rather than escorting another woman. He hadn't taken no for an answer either. At coming-of-age ceremonies, debutantes existed to showcase adolescents on the cusp of adulthood.

"Having an older bodyguard in such an environment will cause you to stand out," Albert had said. "I want to prioritize your safety over my coming of age."

In the present, Albert had just stopped Rosemary from leaving.

"Before you dash off, may I suggest something?" he asked. "I could serve as your escort."



“Seriously?” Rosemary responded.

“Indeed. I might not be of suitable station, but it’s better than going alone, don’t you think?” Albert turned towards the messenger. “Please bring me formal attire at once.”

In his own awkward way, he’s always shown consideration for me, Rosemary thought.

Before long, the messenger returned with a formal outfit. Once Albert finished changing, he also armed himself with a dagger.

“Thank you, Albert,” Rosemary said, her eyes sparkling as she smiled.

“It’s my job, after all.”

Albert was doing everything in his power to keep Rosemary from worrying. Such kindness from her childhood friend caused her to tear up a little.

Once again, my consciousness jumped to another memory. I was at the debutante venue.

Rosemary presented herself without issue. When others asked her about the prince’s absence, she calmly told them about his fever. Not only did the other nobles sympathize with her, but she also received high praise for navigating a difficult social situation with grace. Even her father—who’d also attended the party—gave her passing marks.

Nevertheless, Rosemary committed a huge blunder that night, perhaps due to her relief. After speaking so much, she’d grown thirsty. While conversing with the adults, she grabbed a decorated glass from a nearby table and drained its contents. Immediately, her throat burned. By some miracle, however, she managed not to cough.

Albert—who’d stayed by her side the entire night—noticed something was wrong at once. Thus, he led her over to the venue’s side wall.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I accidentally drank alcohol...” Rosemary groaned in response.

Young noblemen and women were considered old enough to drink upon

attending their debutante. Even so, Rosemary couldn't afford to slip up in front of so many people, so she'd only been drinking juice. Since many other guests had been recommending alcohol, she'd been walking around with a glass of juice to keep up appearances. Unable to bear her thirst any longer, she'd tried to rehydrate with water, which had led to this blunder.

Rosemary's first time being intoxicated almost knocked her out cold. A sense of buoyancy—simultaneously pleasant and nauseating—overtook her. Regardless, she smiled as she announced her departure, desperate not to be found out. Despite her occasional staggering, she managed to leave the venue with Albert supporting her.

Simply put, she needed to return home and rest. Thus, she boarded a Hubert carriage and sat down with her back against the edge. Soon afterwards, Albert followed her aboard the vehicle. While holding a bottle of water in one hand, he instructed the coachman to drive them back to Rosemary's manor. As the carriage swayed, Rosemary grew queasy.

"Would you like to lie down, my lady?" Albert asked.

Rosemary felt too ill to answer him. Her heart hammered in her chest, and every so often, she would ask the coachman to stop the carriage due to her nausea. As a result, they were making slow progress back to the manor.

"Would you like a drink of water?" Albert pressed.

Rosemary managed to nod. Her throat was terribly parched. Alas, she spilled the water due to her unsteady hands. In the end, she gave up, returning the bottle to Albert and passing out with her back against the carriage wall.

As she rested with her eyes closed, cool liquid flowed into her mouth. Rosemary allowed the water she'd so desperately yearned for to pour down her throat. With her eyes shut, she didn't know how she'd received this drink. Nevertheless, something warm and gentle brushed against her lips. As she slipped into a dreamlike state, the cold water and this pleasant warmth improved Rosemary's nausea ever so slightly.

✱ ✱ ✱

WHEN I woke up, the scene unfolding before my eyes gave me quite the

startle. Reynaldo and Albert were both asleep in their chairs, their upper bodies slumped across the table. According to my recollection, the conversation continued to heat up even after dinner. The wine had kept flowing as well. As a result, both men had dozed off at the dining table.

“Wow, I’ve really gone and done it this time...” I mumbled.

Rosemary might have been regarded as a model noblewoman, but her reincarnation had allowed a duke and the high commander to wind up in this sorry state. When I checked the hour, it appeared to be late at night, but there was still enough time for them to return home.

“Reynaldo... Albert...” I called out to them, shaking both their shoulders.

Neither of them responded to me.

I’ve never seen either of them sleep in such a relaxed state.

Considering their immense workload, they hardly ever rested like this. Watching them sleep so soundly was incredibly charming.

Though I wanted to stare at them forever, I couldn’t be so selfish.

But maybe I’ll stay here and let them sleep a little while longer.

And so, I basked in Rosemary’s childhood memories of Reynaldo and Albert without a care in the world.

Side Story: Nicky's Letters

TO my beloved soldier,

Are you well? How is everyone in Tazylia doing?

Since Mother and Father have also written letters, I more or less know how things are back home. Still, I wanted to hear your perspective too. You're the man protecting everyone, after all.

Is everything the same? I hope you miss me. Oh, and just *try* cheating on me while I'm in the capital. I'll find plenty of ways to make you regret it.

I'm only half joking, by the way.

Honestly, the atmosphere inside the castle is much worse than the actual work. I'd like to return home as soon as possible. The cityscape is a wonder to behold, and the capital is filled with things I've never seen before. All that is fun enough, but the actual situation inside the castle... Oops, if I write anything more, the people inspecting the letters will give me an earful. In any case, as the daughter of a provincial count, I—Nicky Tazylia—long for my life back home more than this one.

By the way, I made a new friend. Her name is Mary Edigma, and she's the daughter of a baron. Have you ever heard of the Edigma region? I nearly embarrassed myself because I hadn't. According to Mary, that's to be expected, since they're a small village with nothing of note. Perhaps *you've* heard of the region, though. Apparently, the village is a bit of a distance from Tazylia.

Like me, Mary came to the capital to work as a handmaid and as a potential candidate to be the crown prince's fiancée. While all the other girls were neglecting their duties and fighting to meet the prince, she was working her little tail off. Neither of us were interested in the prince, so I approached her without much thought. When I asked if she had a boyfriend, she said no. Maybe she's just not interested in living in the capital? But anyway, I quite like her, and we work together all the time.

Speaking of which, we transferred from working at the palace to working for the chivalric order. Why, you ask? To help Mary find love, of course! She seems to have a crush on Sir Albert McClain, the high commander. She denies it, but she's always staring at him with a look of concern. I just want to support my friend, you know?

Would hearing that I also made this transfer out of self-interest surprise you? If my father objects to our engagement, we could elope in the capital. Then I could introduce you to him as a knight. Of course, I'm still hoping for the best. Unfortunately, my father is a stubborn man, and I would hate it if he opposed our relationship on the basis of status. We're a count's family in name only. It's about time I parted from this station. My older brother can inherit Father's title, and my older sister has already married into another noble house. Everyone in our family other than Father has told my younger brother and me to do whatever we please.

Sorry for complaining to you about my family. I thought about tearing this letter up and throwing it away, but...I'll leave it as is.

Anyway, I've gotten off track. I was talking about my new friend, right? Mary is so adorable. Not only is her face always bright and cheery, but just being with her is a blast. Oh, and plenty of fascinating things happen when we're together. Ever since we became handmaids for the chivalric order, I've been trying to force Mary and Sir Albert together as much as possible.

(You're probably thinking that I should mind my own business, right?)

But actually, Sir Albert seems quite pleased as well! The way he looks at Mary is different from the way he looks at other women. It's a tender gaze. If this romance blossoms, you might as well call me the angel of love. That would be awesome, right? Right now I'm keeping my mouth shut and watching over them, but I look forward to seeing how things progress! There might even be new developments by the time I send you my next letter.

That aside, please take care of your health. The harvest season is almost here, right? It's a shame I won't be able to help out this year.

I'll be waiting for your reply. Yeah, I know my writing isn't great, but letters will help distract from the loneliness of being apart.

Until next time,

Sometime later.

To my beloved soldier,

Thank you for writing back! I could just imagine your voice reading it. It made me homesick. More importantly, what a surprise! Lys and Kevin got married? Gah, I want to celebrate right now! Missing out is so frustrating. I sent Lys a letter, but once I'm back home, let's bring them a gift and celebrate!

Speaking of your last letter, I had no idea that you dreamed of being a knight. Perhaps we should live in the capital in the future, regardless of whether we elope.

I've actually become acquainted with Sir Phil Eva, the second commander. He's extremely friendly and easy to talk to. What's that? Are you jealous? Oh, don't worry. Everyone knows how much he loves his wife.

Sir Phil was paying close attention to Mary and Sir Albert as well. You remember Mary, right? She's the friend I wrote about in my last letter. Right now, she's actually serving as a handmaid for the Rose duchy, not for the chivalric order. It caught me way off guard when I heard that. I had no idea.

You know of Duke Reynaldo Rose, right? He's so cold that people refer to him as the Ice Duke, but apparently, he's an exemplary politician. From what I've heard, Duke Rose and Crown Prince Rizel are good friends as well.

Since I became a handmaid for the chivalric order, the gossip hasn't stopped pouring in, and I never get tired of it. Currently, there are two hot topics. First, Crown Prince Rizel might be in love. Second, Duke Rose personally brought a single handmaid back to his manor.

And Mary is the star of both of these rumors.

My friend sure is amazing, isn't she? Sadly, she always seemed pretty troubled. She never got as excited about gossip as the other girls, either. Oh, and she always wore this wise, world-weary expression. Whenever I asked her what was wrong, she would dodge the issue, but if I had to guess, it was

probably boy troubles.

Just when I thought Mary and Sir Albert were hitting it off, Prince Rizel fell for her as well. Next, Duke Rose, of all people, drags her back to his duchy! What is this, some kind of fairy tale? Still, I'm worried about Sir Albert. He's seemed down in the dumps since Mary left.

Either way, I'm watching things unfold with pulse-pounding excitement! As my boyfriend, you understand how I must feel, right? Yes, I know that's unbecoming of me, even without you getting on my case. Even so, I want Mary to nab a wonderful boyfriend and find happiness. Just like us.

Mary is the daughter of a baron, and according to her, she doesn't know of any suitable houses to marry into. I hope that even a small part of the future she desires comes true.

Speaking of which, I'd like for you and Mary to meet someday. She's my wonderful and adorable friend, after all. Though it's still a ways off, I'd also like to invite her to our wedding ceremony. Does that make you laugh?

I thought sending letters to each other would help distract me from the loneliness, but I miss you even more now. But at the same time, perhaps I would feel even lonelier without your letters. I reread the one you already sent me every day with great care. And so, I await your next correspondence.

Best regards to my beloved soldier,

Afterword

HI there, everyone. You can call me Akako.

Thank you so much for reading *The Reincarnated Villainess Won't Seek Revenge*. As someone who loves reading villainess stories on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*, I never imagined having my own work in the genre traditionally published. Everything about this feels so surreal.

In the past, I'd find the time in my busy life to read stories on *Narō*. After going through a number of works on the site, I thought to myself, "Someday, when I have the time, I'd like to write a web novel myself." And so, when my schedule opened up a little, I tried my hand at a villainess story. That's how I got here.

I'd like to use this afterword to express my thanks, as I'm truly grateful for the opportunity. Because I began *Reincarnated Villainess* as a hobby, I worried that my writing was too immature for publication. As such, I would like to thank the editors who helped revise my shoddy prose numerous times. Likewise, I would like to thank Futaba-sensei for creating such wonderful character designs and illustrations. You truly brought the vague images in my head to life.

I started writing this on a whim, but I received the support of so many people who helped turn it into a published novel. I can't think of anything more wonderful.

I'm not sure how to fill the pages of this afterword except with words of gratitude.

But, speaking of the novel itself, I originally had two scenes in mind: the opening execution and Reynaldo laughing in front of Rosemary's coffin. Don't you just love yandere characters who have fallen over to the dark side?

Also, while Prince Razel might seem like an indispensable character now, I hadn't thought of him initially. Watching the story take unexpected turns during the actual writing versus plotting was quite interesting.

The original draft of *Reincarnated Villainess* is completed on *Narō*. I plan to

keep posting my fiction there, including side stories for this series. Nothing would make me happier than if you continued reading my works for at least a little while longer. After all, as the author, I've grown quite attached to them.

To conclude this afterword, I would also like to thank the editor who reached out to me and guided me through publication. Thanks to my friends and family who supported me. Thanks to the people who posted impressions and reviews while I was submitting chapters on *Narō*. And finally, thanks to everyone who is holding this book in their hands right now.

I hope we can meet again soon in volume 2!



cross infinite world



THE ABANDONED HEIRESS GETS RICH WITH ALCHEMY AND SCORES AN ENEMY GENERAL!

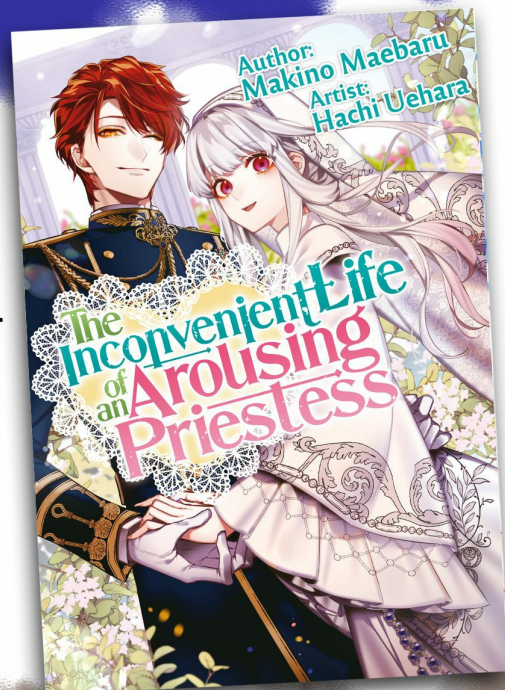
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SINCE I WAS ABANDONED
AFTER REINCARNATING, I WILL
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